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Lull Before the Storm or All Quiet on the Southern Front? The Ottoman-Hungarian War between 1522–1525

Summary: With the loss of Nándorfehérvár (today Belgrade, Serbia), the Hungarian defence system against the Ottomans was seriously weakened. The most important thing for the Hungarians to do was strengthen the border fortresses and a possible recapture of Nándorfehérvár. In order to achieve this, King Louis II appealed for military and financial aid to Christian rulers. In the meantime, military events on the southern front took several turns. In 1522, John Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania, led two successful campaigns to Wallachia, the territory between the Carpathians and the River Danube, to reinstall the pro-Hungarian voivode on the throne of the principality. In 1523, the Ottomans led an incursion in the south of Hungary, which led to a catastrophic defeat of Pasha Ferhat in the Battle of Szávaszentdemeter (today Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia). On the other hand, the year 1524 brought about an Ottoman success with the capture of Szörény (today Turnu-Severin, Romania), the last formidable Hungarian fortress along the lower Danube. In 1525, yet another Christian military achievement is worth mentioning: the Hungarians managed to lift the siege of Jajca (today Jajce in Bosnia-Herzegovina), another important stronghold along the southern border, and Kristóf Frangepán, an experienced mercenary leader, supplied Jajca with provisions, thus it could withstand the Ottoman onslaught till December 1527.
Keywords: Ottoman-Hungarian war, campaigns, siege, battles

The strategic situation in Europe at the beginning of the 1520's was unfavourable for Hungary. Although King Louis II of Hungary and Bohemia agreed to a peace treaty with Sultan Selim in 1519, in which he acknowledged the loss of several border fortresses

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to the Ottoman Empire, but the treaty offered an opportunity to regain breath and prepare for future warfare, possibly with the aid of other Christian realms, if Hungarian diplomacy were successful in bringing about peace among the hostile powers of the continent. The Kingdom of France was deeply involved in the Italian wars with the Holy Roman Empire and Spain, while in eastern Europe the rise of Muscovy and the ever-present threat of the Ottomans and their vassals, the Crimean Tartars hindered effective cooperation of Christian powers to evade these dangers. To make matters worse, in September, Sultan Selim died, and according to Ottoman tradition, this effectively invalidated the peace treaty of 1519. The new sultan, Suleyman sent an envoi to Buda with an offer to renew its validity, but practically simultaneously began preparation for a campaign. At the end of the rule of the former sultan and at the beginning of the reign of the new ruler, counsellors from the Balkan peninsula were in majority in the Ottoman court, and they managed to convince Sultan Suleyman, that the aim of the new campaign should be Hungary, as the former ruler conquered huge territories in the East, which more than doubled the size of the Ottoman Empire. Now it was logical to turn towards Europe, which promised rich opportunities to pillage and it was in accordance with the idea of jihad, holy war against the infidels. The pretext for the attack was that the Hungarian court postponed giving an answer to the peace offer of Suleyman and even held his envoi in custody. In the spring of 1521, after putting down an uprising in Syria, the Ottoman forces started their march towards Hungary relatively late, only in May, which turned out to be a favourable circumstance for the Hungarians, because in case of an earlier start of the campaign, the consequences could have even been more disastrous.[1]

The year of 1521 brought about catastrophic events for Hungary. Sultan Suleyman led his first campaign against his north-western neighbour.[2] After a two month siege the most important stronghold of the Hungarian defence system, the fortress of Nándorfehérvár fell, causing irreparable damage to the whole defence line.[3] It was clear to everybody that the only way to counterbalance this loss would be the strengthening of other existing castles, or a possible recapture of Nándorfehérvár. In 1521 a Hungarian army assembled in the field of Mohács with a plan to lift the sieges of Nándorfehérvár, or if it is too late, to begin an immediate siege to retake the fortress before the Ottomans could rebuild the ruins after their long siege. The autumn of 1521 would have provided a good opportunity to achieve this aim, but in the camp of the Hungarian army an epidemic broke out, and the only way to save the army from complete destruction was to dissolve it as soon as possible after making a vow that next year they would assemble

1 Ágoston G. 2022, 147–148; Fodor P. 2023, 32–33.

2 Ágoston G. 2022, 148.

3 Szakály F. (ed.), 1980; Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 356.

again and retake the fortress of Nándorfehérvár.[4] But the idea was abandoned later due to financial difficulties. However, we can conclude, though it may sound strange, but the 1521 campaign can be regarded from the Hungarian point of view as a partial success.[5] The original plan of the Ottomans was a quick capture of the border castles and a strategic breakthrough to capture Buda, the capital of Hungary and a total subjugation of the country. Three factors prevented this in 1521, one is the prolonged resistance of several border castles, especially that of Nándorfehérvár, which lasted for two months, thus preventing major Ottoman forces from operating within the country. The second factor was the mobilisation of the Hungarian army, which was slow due to supply difficulties, and the army which finally assembled at Mohács by the end of August was much smaller than the Ottoman army, but still it was a force to reckon with. The third factor was that nature intervened on behalf of the Christians. The summer of 1521 was wetter than usual causing several floods, which made the movement of large military forces much more difficult than at other times. To make matters worse for the Ottomans, on 19th July 1521, the River Sava washed away the military bridge of the Ottomans making it practically impossible for the whole of the army to cross it even in case of a successful siege of Nándorfehérvár. Taking all this into consideration, the sultan decided to limit his aims and he got satisfied with the capture of Nándorfehérvár and several other border strongholds instead of heading towards Buda instantly, in which case the Ottoman occupation of Hungary would have started five years earlier than in reality.

The result of the 1521 campaign left the Hungarian military and politic leadership in a precarious situation. The king was thoroughly aware of the danger threatening his realm and was willing to take active steps to attempt to withstand complete destruction at the hands of the Ottomans. Circumstances seemed to be favourable to strengthen his position. The Habsburg and Jagiello families had come to a double marriage agreement in 1515 in Vienna[6] according to which in 1522 King Louis II married Mary of Habsburg and became an ally of the powerful Habsburg family, whose possible aid in defending Hungary against the Ottomans would be indispensable. The royal pair travelled to Bohemia in 1522 to stabilise their power there (King Louis II was king of Bohemia as well since 1516).[7] He also initiated diplomatic moves to bring about peace among Christian rulers, so that they could focus on the anti-Ottoman war, but he could only achieve partial successes in this respect. From the military point of view, the year of 1522 was favourable for Hungary, because Sultan Suleyman decided to capture the island of Rhodes, the seat of the Knights of Saint John, and the siege lasted for a long time and the Ottomans suffered heavy losses, which they could

4 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 355.

5 Sebők F. 2002, 58.

6 Hermann Z. 1961, 28–38.

7 Engel P., Kristó G., Kubinyi A. 2001, 371.

counter only in years.[8] However, the Ottomans could also achieve success on the Hungarian front, as they managed to capture the fortresses of Knin (today Croatia) and Scardona (today Skradin in Croatia), but they besieged Klissza (today Klis in Croatia) without success.[9] During the summer, the troops of archduke of Austria, Ferdinand helped provide Jajca with provisions and lift the siege of Klissza.[10]

This year, John Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania led two successful campaigns into Wallachia, a Romanian principality, which had to balance between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. In the spring the first Hungarian campaign managed to achieve success and reinstall the pro-Hungarian voivode on his throne. In the summer the Ottomans led a counterstrike, and the voivode had to flee to Hungary. In October 1522, John Szapolyai led a second campaign there and again evicted the pro-Ottoman voivode from his rule, and reinstalled the pro-Hungarian one.[11] However, it was a serious setback that pasha Ali managed to capture yet another important Hungarian border fortress, Orsova (today Orşova, Romania) and the castle of Pét[12] (today a ruin in Romania) at the lower Danube in March in the same year.

As a backlash to the Hungarian successes in Wallachia in 1522, the Ottomans led an incursion into the south of Hungary called Szerémség (today Sremska, Serbia) in 1523. In March beg Bali of Nándorfehérvár unsuccessfully besieged Pétervárad[13] (today part of Novi Sad in Serbia), while in May Ottoman troops from Bosnia laid sieges to Klissza and Kruppa (today Krupa in Bosnia-Hercegovina), but to no avail.[14] In August the sultan's son-in-law, pasha Ferhat led the campaign, which aimed at destruction of the still remaining Hungarian border fortresses in the district as well as pillage and looting of the mixed Hungarian and Serbian population. Pál Tomori, archbishop of Kalocsa was responsible for the defence of this area, and he was just the right person for this job. He used to be a soldier himself, but due to private life crises decided to become a monk. However, the pope managed to convince him to accept the appointment to be archbishop of Kalocsa, and leader of the southern defence system. He was a conscientious prelate and a capable military leader, who took every measure in his capability to perform his tasks flawlessly. In his hands, the border defence system was stabilised and could withstand the Ottoman threat until the disastrous year of 1526. The Ottomans occupied an important border fortress, Osztrovica (today Ostrovica, Croatia).[15]

8 Ágoston G. 2022, 152.; Sarnowsky J. 2025, 83–101.

9 Thallóczy L., Hodinka A. 1903, 138, 151; Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 356.

10 Thallóczy L., Hodinka A. 1903, 172–180, 182–187; Bárány A. 2014, 68, 77.

11 Tóth N.C. 2012, 987–1014.

12 Szakály F. 1986, 1986, 51.

13 Kubinyi A. 1978, 213.

14 Kubinyi A. 1978, 209.

15 Szakály F. 1986, 51.

In 1523, Pál Tomori organised a relatively small but capable army consisting of mercenaries and *banderia* of local barons and counties of southern Hungary. This army led by István Bárdi, a capable leader of court hussars of King Louis II, defeated the Ottoman forces in two battles at Szávaszentdemeter (today Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) and Nagyolaszi (today Manđelos, Serbia) with the help of local peasants and Serbian boatmen, who served on the River Danube and Sava as border patrols. The Ottoman defeat was a serious one. According to contemporary sources, they lost about 8,000 warriors, many of them drowned in the River Sava when trying to flee from the battle. Pasha Ferhat managed to survive the battle, but as a result of his defeat, the sultan had him suffocated. However, the Hungarians also had to pay heavily for victory; about 600 of the best warriors were killed in action, and they were difficult to replace. But the Turks had to face the fact that in spite of the loss of Nándorfehérvár, the Hungarians were still capable of dealing a heavy blow at them, and the defence system was headed by the right person to fulfil his tasks.[16]

In the same year, Hungarian diplomatic efforts achieved one of its aims to organise a conference where the steps to be taken against the Ottoman threat were discussed. Hungary offered a 60,000 strong army in case of an all-out Christian effort to recapture Nándorfehérvár and stabilise the southern frontier would be taken. But the discussions ended without a concrete plan due to financial difficulties and unwillingness on behalf of some of the parties. Some negotiators voiced their opinion that if the Hungarians could field a 60,000 strong army, they would not need any aid, so finally the discussions ended inconclusively.[17]

In the year of 1524 the Ottomans managed to achieve one of their strategic aims. They occupied the castle of Szörény (today Turnu-Severin, Romania), which was the last important Hungarian border fortress beside the River Danube. As the Ottomans used the river as their most important supply line, where they transported ammunition, victuals, and all sorts of provisions necessary for successful warfare on ships, it was evident that the river Danube should be secured and firmly in Ottoman hands. This is why Hungarian leadership considered it of utmost importance to retain this castle, and after its fall some voiced their opinion that its loss was even worse than the fall of Nándorfehérvár, which is obviously an exaggeration, but it clearly signified the importance of this castle.

In 1525 it was obvious that the strategic clash between the Ottoman Empire and Christianity is unavoidable. As a preparatory movement, the Turks wanted to break down the last remaining important Hungarian stronghold, Jajca (today Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina). With the occupation of this castle, the Ottomans would have been in a position to launch a major-scale campaign against Hungary without any serious threat from the Hungarian border defence system. The castle had already been

16 Kubinyi A. 1978, 194–222.

17 Zombori I. (ed.), 2004, 274–284; Lakatos B. (ed.), 2024, 793–802.

besieged by them in earlier periods, for example during the time of King Matthias, and they managed to take it then, but King Matthias immediately recaptured it,[18] and it was firmly in Christian hands during the Jagiello era of Hungary (1490–1526). The Ottomans laid a heavy siege of the castle in 1525, but King Louis II hired the services of Kristóf Frangepán, a mercenary leader of Croatian origin, who had been in the service of King Francis I of France, but as a result of the French defeat in the battle of Pavia[19] in 1525, Frangepán became unemployed. As I mentioned, he was a capable military leader and managed to organise a relieving army of about 8,000 soldiers to lift the siege of Jajca. The army consisted of mercenaries paid by the pope and *banderia* of Hungarian and Croatian barons. It could count on artillery, cavalry and infantry. He led his men skilfully; he paid special attention to reconnaissance and wing cover. As the train of carts carrying provisions was quite a long one, Frangepán ordered *pixidarii* (riflemen) to the head, middle and end of the convoy as well in order to withstand a surprise attack on behalf of the Ottomans. He directed his troops with such a brilliant timing and coordination, that they forced the Ottomans to give up the siege and withdraw, while he could also transport supplies to Jajca, which as a result could be held until well after the debacle of Mohács.[20]

To sum up the political and military situation of Hungary between the fall of Nándorfehérvár in 1521 and the battle of Mohács in 1526, we can conclude that because of the disproportion of financial means and military resources of Hungary and that of the Ottoman Empire, it was only a question of time when the fall of independent Hungary would happen. As events of the period in focus prove Hungarian military leaders and politicians, including the still teenager ruler, were aware of the danger that threatened the kingdom and they did everything they were capable of doing to alter the strategic situation. They attempted to bring about peace among the leaders of Christianity, to unite their forces against the common foe, but the political situation in Europe was too complex to make an all-European effort to stop the Ottomans. As regards military capabilities, Hungarian leaders performed relatively well in smaller scale campaigns, some of them, eg. Kristóf Frangepán performed especially well on the battlefield, but as it turned out in the battle of Mohács, they were incapable of leading a larger scale army in a field battle, where several tens of thousands of men would be fighting.

As the 500th anniversary of the battle of Mohács will be remembered, countless studies, articles and books will deal with this topic, I deemed it necessary to shed light on the military events that led up to this battle, which decided the fate of Central Europe for centuries. I hope that my short summary of these events will help the reader better understand the circumstances of this decisive defeat of Christianity.

18 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 277–278.

19 Konstam A. 1996, 55–76.

20 Thallóczy L. 1915, 241–254; Pálosfalvi T. 2018, 419–420.

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A Comprehensive Analysis of Five Persian Riveted Mail Armour from a Private Museum in Qazvin, Iran

Summary: This study examines five examples of Persian riveted mail armour (*zereh*) from a private collection in Qazvin, Iran, with the aim of documenting their construction features, typological variation and functional design. The analysed specimens include both frontal-opening and pullover-style mail shirts, allowing for comparison between the two principal Persian mail configurations. All pieces are constructed using riveted iron rings arranged predominantly in a 1-in-4 linkage pattern, with variations in ring size, weight and textile reinforcement. Particular attention is given to structural elements such as the *garibān-e zereh* (neck guard), sleeve construction and additional openings intended to improve mobility and wearability. The study highlights the technical sophistication and adaptability of Persian armourers, demonstrating how functional requirements, comfort, and battlefield performance were integrated into a coherent material tradition.
Keywords: Persia, mail armour, neck protection, riveted rings, armour, hauberk

Introduction

Mail armour (*zereh*) represents one of the most significant and enduring forms of defensive equipment in Persian military history. Characterised by interlinked metal rings forming a flexible yet protective mesh, Persian mail developed into a highly refined craft tradition that combined technical precision with functional adaptability.

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Over centuries, armourers in Iran produced a wide range of mail garments that responded to evolving battlefield conditions, changes in warfare technology and regional aesthetic preferences.

This study examines five examples of Persian riveted mail armour preserved in a private collection in Qazvin, Iran. These specimens provide a valuable opportunity to investigate variation within Persian mail construction, including differences in structural design, fastening systems, ring manufacture and textile integration. Particular attention is given to two principal typologies: frontal-opening mail shirts, which allow ease of wear and adjustment, and pullover-style garments, which are constructed as continuous forms and worn over the head.

These five examples of Persian armour are reported to have originated from a private family museum in Qazvin, Iran. According to the provenance history, the pieces were preserved by the family, together with other examples of arms and armour, for approximately five generations before being sold to the Alqarashi Collection in Kuwait last year. The family museum was subsequently liquidated, resulting in the dispersal of its holdings. The physical construction of the armour provides important evidence regarding its original purpose. The mail is composed of solid, closely forged rings secured with substantial rivets, features characteristic of armour intended for practical use. The strength and durability of the construction suggest that these garments were made for protection in combat rather than for purely ceremonial, theatrical, or devotional purposes. This distinction is significant in the context of Persian armour, as mail garments produced or adapted for *Ta'ziyeh* and other ritual performances can closely resemble functional military armour. In the present examples, however, the robust rings, heavy riveted construction, and overall strength of the garments appear more consistent with battlefield equipment than with armour intended primarily for ritual display.

Taken together, the Qazvin provenance, the extended history of family ownership and the distinctly martial construction of these garments provide a compelling basis for assigning them to the later Safavid–Afsharid period. Their substantial riveted rings and robust construction are characteristic of armour made for actual use and are difficult to reconcile with mail produced primarily for *Ta'ziyeh* or other ceremonial performances. These examples should therefore be regarded as functional Persian military armour, most plausibly dating from the late Safavid period through the Afsharid era, when the continued use of mail remained an important element of Iranian battlefield equipment.

Beyond their technical aspects, these armours also reflect broader historical and cultural developments. Persian mail armour is documented in both archaeological material and visual sources, and its terminology is deeply embedded in Persian literary and historical traditions. Terms such as *zereh*, *joshan*, and related expressions appear in classical texts, while depictions from antiquity through the Islamic and

Safavid periods illustrate the continued evolution of armour forms and their social significance. By analysing construction and morphological features, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Persian mail armour classification. It also seeks to situate these five specimens within the wider continuum of Iranian armouring practices, highlighting both continuity in technical tradition and diversity in practical design solutions.

Historical Background: Origins and Early References

Iranian armour enjoyed an outstanding reputation throughout the centuries. Persian armour makers surpassed all others in Asia in their craft and were regarded as preeminent armourers of the region. Over time, demand for Persian armour grew steadily and examples of it have been found in Arabia, the Caucasus, India, Turkey, Central Asia and Russia.[1] Regarding the depiction of mail armour in Persian contexts, reference may be made to a graffito discovered at Dura-Europos portraying a *cataphractus* (or *clibanarius*).[2] *Cataphracti* were trained as heavily armoured mounted warriors primarily to engage infantry, whereas *clibanarii* were trained to counter enemy cavalry.[3] The figure, identified first as a Parthian cataphract and dated to the 2nd century CE,[4] shows a mounted warrior wearing a tall, conical helmet with streamers attached at the apex. Typologically, this helmet is also classified as a ridge helmet.[5] However, it should be noted that identifying and interpreting the types of armour represented in iconographic sources is highly challenging, owing to the stylized and often ambiguous nature of such depictions.[6] However, subsequent scholarship has attributed this graffito to the early Sasanian period (232/233–256 CE).[7] The armour appears to consist of segments or lamellae, possibly combined with a mail aventail or even a full hood extending to the shoulders. The horizontal lines on the arms and legs may represent laminated armour.[8] Alternative interpretations exist. Connolly argues that the depiction represents scale armour with segmented plate elements

1 Robinson H.R. 1995, 17.

2 For a detailed explanation and differentiation between cataphracti and clibanarii, see: Mielczarek M. 1993.

3 Mielczarek M. 1993, 48–49.

4 Wójcikowski R.S. 2013, 233, dates it to the late Parthian period (from the second century to the early third century CE).

5 Wójcikowski R.S. 2013, 235.

6 Mielczarek M. 1993, 11.

7 See: Wójcikowski R.S. 2013, 233–234.

8 Mielczarek M. 1993, 19–20; Wójcikowski R.S. 2013, 235, describes the leg and arm protection as segment-like, laminar, curved and elongated metal plates, arranged horizontally. However, these are not laminar plates but laminated plates.

protecting the arms and lower abdomen, and dates the image to the 3rd century CE.[9] A third interpretation suggests a mail-and-plate construction: mail covering the upper torso, reinforced by two rows of vertical splints at the waist, with a mail skirt attached below.[10] This hybrid construction later became highly popular throughout the Middle East, India, and other parts of Asia, where it was known in Persian as *joshan*.[11]

The finds in Dura-Europos are used as a possible source for the identification of Sasanian armour.[12] Depictions and archaeological remains there highlight the usage of the following types of armour: laminated armour (vambraces and greaves of graffito horseman); splint armour (body armour of graffito horseman); scale armour (numerous iron scales found on site, three housings found in Tower 19, upper chest armour of graffito horseman and his horse's trapper); and mail armour (corselet found on site).[13] Mail armour, consisting of interlinked metal rings, appears to have emerged later than lamellar armour. It became widespread in Iran during the late Parthian period and gained even greater prominence under the Sasanians.[14] However, there is a controversy regarding the source of other pieces of armour in the graffito shown above. Other opinions exist as all the surviving metal scale armour has been identified as Roman by James. James identifies only the mail corselet as Sasanian based on decoration, peculiarities of construction and the find site. The depiction of the overthrow of Ardavān V by Ardašīr I, near Firūzābād (ca. 225 CE) shows a distinction between the Parthian and the Sasanian sets of armour. Allan thinks that the Parthians wore laminated and scale armour, in contrast to the Sasanians, who wore mail body armour, vambraces, laminated greaves, and, in one case, a breastplate. The Firūzābād reliefs show the Sasanians wearing long-sleeved mail shirts that reach to the wrists and to mid-thigh and laminated leg protection. Some form of cuirass or garment covers the body from neck to waist but not the arms.[15] Bivar makes the same observation regarding the representation of cavalry warfare in the friezes depicting Ardashir I at Tang-e Chogan in Firūzābād. Body armour is prominently represented, and the Parthian figures are shown wearing the older lamellar armour, whereas the Sasanian cavalrymen are depicted in mail shirts composed of interlinked metal rings.[16] Further, Bivar opines that mail armour offered several practical advantages over lamellar armour, particularly in terms of mobility, flexibility and ventilation. However,

9 Connolly P. 1998, 258–259.

10 Wójcikowski R.S. 2013, 235–236, characterises the body protection as comprising either mail or small scales, while the lower abdomen is specifically protected by two vertically arranged rows of metal lames.

11 Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2010, 191–194.

12 Note that Sasanians ruled from 224–651 CE.

13 Dwyer B., Farrokh K., Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2020, 148–149.

14 Wójcikowski R.S. 2013, 237.

15 Dwyer B., Farrokh K., Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2020, 148–149.

16 Bivar A.D.H. 1972, 275–276.

modern reconstructions and experimental armoured combat suggest that mail may actually be heavier than lamellar armour and, when worn with a gambeson — as it generally would have been — does not necessarily provide significant ventilation. The principal advantages of mail therefore appear to have been its greater flexibility and mobility, as well as its versatility and ability to be worn in combination with other forms of armour. The Firūzābād frieze of Ardashir I demonstrates that the Sasanians employed both mail and lamellar armour.[17]

Some researchers, such as Dmitriev, assume that Sasanian armour consisted of a long- sleeved mail tunic protecting the body almost to the knees, which is seen on the relief, possibly representing Khosrou II from Taq-e Bostan. Dmitriev provides some details on the Sassanian body armour in his book *Riders in Gleaming Armor: The Warfare of Sassanid Iran and the History of the Roman-Persian Wars*. He bases his research on iconographic and written sources to study mail armour and concludes that the Sasanian mail armour protected the warrior's body up to the knees. Dmitriev concludes that Sasanian armour covered the rider down to the thighs. However, this is contradicted at the beginning of the dynasty at Firūzābād, as described above, where the armour ends mid-thigh and likewise in Taq-e Bostān, where the armour also ends partway down the thigh, at least a hand's breadth above the knee. The mail shirt at Dura Europos, which is generally thought to be Sasanian, is at most 70 cm long and so would not reach the knees on a medium-sized man. Sasanian mail armour covers the neck and most of the face by means of the aventail of the helmet. The Firūzābād reliefs do not show helmets with aventails in use, but the heroic nature of the sculptures of the king and his son defeating their more armoured opponents may have been exaggerated to show the power and majesty of the Sasanian dynasty.[18]

Mail armour continued to be used even in the Safavid period (1501–1722 CE). The story of *Hossein Kord-e Shabestari* provides important information regarding the terms used for arms and armour during the reign of Shah Abbas Safavid (1587–1629 CE). The term *zereh dāvudi* is used in the text to refer to riveted mail. The term *āstin-e zereh* is used to refer to the sleeves of the armour. *Dāman-e zereh* refers to the lower parts of the mail and literally means 'mail skirt'. *Garibān-e zereh* (standard) is used to refer to the extra protection for the neck and upper parts of the breast made of mail.[19] By the mid-19th century, Floor states that the crafting of mail, cuirasses and helmets had become a thing of the past (at the end of the Qajar era, 1794–1925 CE) and that their production was subsequently reduced and abandoned. The armour that was still being manufactured was used for ceremonial rather than practical purposes.[20] Floor quotes

17 Bivar A.D.H. 1972, 277–278.

18 Dwyer B., Farrokh K., Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2020, 149–150.

19 See: Shabgahi S. 2003, 30, 51.

20 Floor W. 2003, 265.

Tahvildar, who stated that mail makers were called *zerehsāz*. Some still existed by the mid-19th century, but they were active in other occupations. Some helmet and cuirass makers brought their mail to Turkey since they still had some customers there. A few made mail at home, but it was not an important trade. Tahvildar also stated that the group of helmet and cuirass makers once comprised a large group, but their numbers were drastically reduced. For many years, they found buyers in Turkey (Istanbul) and other countries. Some people continued to make helmets and cuirasses in Isfahan. Floor states that traditional armour was not only made in Isfahan but also in Khorasan and Shiraz. A *kaftan* or *jivirak* was worn under the *jošan* or *zereh*, offering extra protection to the body.[21]

Mail armour was called *zereh* زره that was already mentioned by Ferdowsi.[22] Another term used to refer to mail armour in Persian is *der'* درع (pl. *doru'* دروع, *adrā'* ادراع, *adro'* ادرع, *derā'* دراع), which was also used in the *Šāhnāme* (*Book of Kings*).[23] *Digital Lexicon of Dehkhoda* describes that *der'* درع is a cloth that is made/weaved from iron mail and is used to protect the body during the war. Mail was also called *jayba* جیبه.[24] Mail armour was worn together with a gambeson, which was called *der' va xaftān* درع و خفتان [25] or *der' va xaftān-e mokammel* درع و خفتان مکمل (mail armour and gambeson). They complete each other and go together.[26] Gambeson was also called *gabr* or *gabar* گبر (*Šāhnāme*): "He is wearing mail armour, *jošan* جوشن armour, and a padding, he yells like a thundering cloud."[27]

Mail armour can be classified into two general types: pure mail (*zereh*) and mail and plate (*joshan*). The rings can be riveted, punched, welded, or simply butted.[28] Riveted mail was called *zereh dāvudi* (*davudi* style mail) or *zereh mixgerd* (mail with rounded nails), and butted mail was called *zereh mamuli* (common mail). *Zereh dāvudi* was a sturdy mail with small rings, and the rings were linked through each other and riveted closed.[29] Another term to refer to riveted mail was *der'-e dāvudi* درع داودی a riveted mail armour.[30] Although butted mail rings were generally used to make ceremonial mail armour, some were hardened and could be used on the battlefield. It should be noted that Japanese mail makers also used hardened butted rings for making battlefield armour. Mail was made from small rings, each ring connected to four others.

21 Floor W. 2003, 265; Matufi A. 1999, 221, 348–349.

22 Ferdōsi H.A. 1995, 1351.

23 Ferdōsi H.A. 1995, 191.

24 DLD 2026.

25 Eskandar Beig T. 2003, 701.

26 Esterābādi M.M.M. 1991, 12.

27 زره دارد و جوشن و خود و گبر | بغرّد به کردار غرّنده ابر (*Zereh dārad va jošan va xud va gabr | beqorrad be kerdār qorrande abr*). Ferdōsi H.A. 1995, 442.

28 Zeller R., Rohrer E.F. 1955, 35.

29 Shahidi E. 2001, 405.

30 Nezāmi Ganje'I N.M.Y.Z.M. 1999, 133.

This is called the four-into-one construction.[31] The bulk of a mail would be four-into-one rings, but it could be tailored for a precise fit by adding or removing links at different places to loosen or tighten the fit, while gussets could be added to places that needed a lot of stretch, such as elbows and underarms, without making the garment around that area sag. Adding or removing links in adjoining rows creates bits of three-into-one or five-into-one, which allows precise fitting for comfort. Isfahan was a major centre for making quality mail.[32] *Joshan* is a mail-and-plate construction in the shape of jackets or coats from steel mail with two, four, or eight steel plates arranged in two rows with a buckle in front and three or five rows of small tiles on the back; these were arranged similarly to roof tiles. Some *joshans* show the small tiling on the front.[33] Quoting the lexicon *Annanderaj, the Digital Lexicon of Dehkhoda* states that *joshan* was a combination of mail and plate, whereas *zereh* stands for mail only. *The Lexicon of Borhān* confirms that *zereh* consists of different rings to offer protection for the body and is worn to go to war. Ferdowsi uses both terms *joshan* and *zereh* in his epic *Shāhnāme*. Both are used in *Tārikhe Sistān* as well.[34]

Another type of armour used was *qazāgand* قزاگند. It consisted of mail armour sandwiched between two layers of light padding.[35] Usamah Ibn-Munquidh describes a particularly heavy version made with two layers of mail.[36] Usamah talks about wearing a *qazāgand* constructed of two layers of mail during an incident when Saladin admonishes him for not donning his armour before a battle. He replies: "By Allah I cannot put on anything more. We are in the early part of the night and my kazaghand is furnished with two coats of mail, one on top of the other. As soon as I see the enemy I shall put it on." After the battle he demonstrates the armour's construction to Saladin. "I pulled out my knife and ripped it at the breast and disclosed the side of the two coats of mail. The kazaghand enclosed a Frankish coat of mail extending to the bottom of it, with another coat of mail on top of it reaching as far as the middle. Both were equipped with the proper linings, felt pads, silk stuffing (al-lasin) and rabbits' hair." In Europe, this armour was called a *jazerant,* and Blair suggests that the word is a derivative of *qazāgand*.[37] In the *Farhang-e Nafisi*, Nafisi provides two meanings for *qazāgand*:

a. a cloth that is filled with wool and silk and worn in battle and

b. mail armour[38]

31 Kobylinsky L. 2000, 68.

32 Zeller R., Rohrer E.F. 1955, 35.

33 Kobylinsky L. 2000, 68.

34 See: DLD 2026.

35 Also see: Nicolle D. 1998, 15.

36 Ibn-Munquidh U. 1978, 197, 130–131.

37 Blair C. 1958, 23.

38 Nafisi A.A. 1964, 2658.

Some mail armour have long sleeves and some short sleeves and come in different sizes. The mail was put over the head and had a textile collar at the neck. There was also mail in the shape of a jacket that could be buttoned at the front or in the form of a long coat. Strong mail had larger diameters of 10–15 mm and was heavier and stiffer, whereas the lighter mail was more delicate and elastic with link diameters as small as 4 mm. The diameter of the mail was a factor determining its flexibility and strength.[39] Some mail had alternate rows of solid links punched from sheet metal, and some researchers assume the purpose of these solid links was to make the armour more immune to piercing. However, the more likely reason for this type of construction is to increase the speed of production. If the armourer had access to pre-made solid links, he could insert two links at a time but only need to rivet one of them, thus almost halving the time needed to assemble the mail. Sometimes, copper or brass rings were mixed with steel and iron rings for decorative purposes.[40] These rings were put among the steel rings in such a way that certain patterns, such as rhombuses or waves, were formed.

In analysing a Persian mail hauberk from the 15th century CE, Rose surprisingly discovered that six different forms of rings were used to make the mail. Generally, there are either riveted or punched rings.[41] The riveted rings are drawn, elliptical in their profile, and used for connecting the rings. Each of the riveted rings is 1.5 mm wide and is connected to four punched (embossed) rings. The ends of the punched rings are not welded to each other. Instead, they are punched from sturdy iron sheet metal using a punching tool. Thus, the punched rings are made of one single piece and can be identified by the sharp ridges or burrs of their periphery. The punched rings are 2 mm wide and of various strengths. On some riveted rings, which were hammered flat, the width of the ring goes up to 5 mm.[42] Different forms of punched rings make this mail very special. On the front and back sides of the left breast are punched rings that are ornamented with two concentric circles. There are also punched rings ornamented with a sigmoidal, wavy, S-shaped, arabesque design. On the right side of the breast, the front side has punched rings with inscriptions, and the right side on the back once again has a sigmoidal, arabesque design. The odd aspect of this mail is that the rings have different inscriptions from the *Qur'an*.[43] For example, one of the rings has the following inscription that can be found on many oriental arms: *La fata ella Ali, la seif ella Dhulfaghar* (There is no young [brave] man but Ali, there is no sword but Dhulfighar). Another ring bears the inscription *Ali*, *Hassan*, *Fatima* while another repeatedly says, *Allah ta ala* (Praise God). Unfortunately, Rose was unable to provide

39 Kobylinsky L. 2000, 68.

40 Zeller R., Rohrer E.F. 1955, 35.

41 Rose W. 1902–1905, 9.

42 Rose W. 1902–1905, 10.

43 Rose W. 1902–1905, 10.

either a transcription or a translation for the other rings and just mentioned that there are many other rings with different transcriptions that had to be translated. Rose hypothesises that since the names of Ali (the first Imam of the Shiites and the fourth Caliph), Hassan (his first son and the second Imam of the Shiites) and Fatima are all Shiite saints, this mail was probably an old Persian work. This mail bears the signature *Mohammad II*.[44]

Some Terms Related to Mail Armour in Persian Manuscripts

Mail armour is called *zereh* in Persian. This term derives from the older form *zrâdha*, which appears in the *Vendidad* (Fargard 14, verse 9). During the Sassanian era, *zrâdha* was preserved in the *Vendidad*, while *zrêh* became the more common term for armour.[45] Another term is *zerehdār* زرەدار: someone who is wearing mail armour; armoured, armoured man.[46] A warrior who wore mail armour was called *zerehpuš* زره پوش.[47] Another type of mail armour was called *zerehin* زرهین.[48] There are different terms in Persian that describe the makers of mail. These include *zerehbāf* زرەباف, mail maker, *zerehsāz* زره ساز: mail armour maker,[49] and *zerehgar* زرەگر: mail-armour maker.[50] The craft of making mail armour is called *zerehgari* زرەگری.[51]

Different parts of a mail armour are called as follows:[52]

a. Mail armour made of butted mail rings was called *zereh-e ma'muli* زره معمولی (lit. common mail). Mail armour made of riveted rings was called *zereh-e mixgerd* زره میخ گرد: riveted mail; a sturdy mail with small rings that are linked through each other and riveted closed.[53] Riveted mail was also called *zereh-e dāvudi* زره داودی. This was a type of mail armour attributed to the Prophet Dāvud and made by him.[54] It is used to refer to a riveted mail, a sturdy mail with small rings that are linked through each other and riveted closed. Dehkhoda explains that *zereh dāvudi* زره داودی is a type of mail armour where sword strikes and arrows cannot pierce it. This term is used to describe mail made in the *dāvudi* داودی style.

44 Rose W. 1902–1905, 9.

45 See: Pur Davood E. 1969, 19; Matufi A. 1999, 219. For additional attestations of the term in the *Avesta*, see: the "Srosh Yasht", verses 23 and 45.

46 Ferdŏsi H.A. 1995, 284.

47 Asadi Tusi H. 1938, 1317.

48 Mobārak Šāh Faxr-e Modabbar M.M.S. 1967, 369.

49 Āsef M.H. 2003, 89.

50 Manučehri Dāmqāni A.A.G.A. 1984, 60.

51 See: DLD 2026.

52 For more information on the following terms, see: Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2010.

53 Shahidi E. 2001, 405.

54 Manučehri Dāmqāni A.A.G.A. 1984, 178.

It is different from (and likely superior to) *zereh-e mamuli* زره معمولی, which is lighter and less resistant to arrows. The following mail has rings made of riveted rings.

b. *čambar-e zereh* چنبر زره an individual ring of a mail armour.[55] It is also called *halqe-ye zereh* حلقه زره mail ring.[56] A riveted ring was called *halqe-ye mixi* حلقه میخی riveted mail ring.[57] Based on the number of rivets in each ring of the mail armour, rings can be classified as *halqe-ye yekmixi* حلقه یک‌میخی, a mail ring with one rivet, *halqe-ye domixi* حلقه دومیخی, a mail ring with two rivets, and *halqe-ye semixi* حلقه سه‌میخی, a mail ring with three rivets.[58] A brazed mail ring was called *halqe-ye lahimi* حلقه لحیمی. And a riveted brazed mail ring was called *halqe-ye lahimi bā mix* حلقه لحیمی با میخ.[59] The rings of this mail armour are *halqe-ye yekmixi* حلقه یک‌میخی (mail ring with one rivet).

c. *garibān-e zereh* گریبان زره the standard or neck protection of the mail armour.[60] The origins of this word go back to the Middle Persian word *garīvpān*.[61] The neck protection of this mail is made of canvas and linen and dyed in blue.

d. *āstin-e zereh* آستین زره sleeves of armour of this mail armour are short.[62]

e. *nimzereh* نیم زره: half mail armour; a short mail armour, covering the body and half of the sleeves.[63] This mail armour is a short mail armour covering up to the elbows.

f. *čāk-e zereh* چاک زره opening of a mail armour.[64] The following mail armour has a frontal opening with two clasps for closing it. It also has a back opening starting at the tailbone.

g. *band-e zereh* بند زره the straps that tighten the mail armour.[65]

h. *zereh-e tang halqe* زره تنگ حلقه: a tightly woven mail; a dense weave. This type of mail armour was intended to resist armour-piercing arrows. Mail armour was made with different ring sizes. Some had larger rings and some smaller ones. For a mail armour made of small rings, other terms were also used, such as *zereh-e tang halqe-ye dāvudi* زره تنگ حلقه داودی: mail armour with small and tightly woven riveted rings or *zereh-e tang-e dāvudi* زره تنگ داودی: a tightly woven mail in the *dāvudi* داودی (riveted) style[66] and *zereh-e xord halqe* زره خرد حلقه: a mail armour with

55 Xonji Esfahāni F. 2003, 149.
56 Nezāmi Ganje'i N.M.Y.Z.M. 1998, 164.
57 Romanowsky D. 1967c, picture 27.
58 Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2010; Romanowsky D. 1967c, picture 27.
59 Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2010; Romanowsky D. 1967c, picture 27.
60 Šabestari A.Š. (ed.), 2003, 56.
61 Farahvashi B. 2002a, 525.
62 Šabestari A.Š. (ed.), 2003, 30.
63 Dorudbāši Beihaqi N.A.M.A.Š. 1975, 135.
64 Asadi Tusi H. 1938, 448.
65 Ferdōsi H.A. 1995, 1321.
66 Šabestari A.Š. (ed.), 2003, 30.

small rings.[67] Tightly woven mail armour was called *zereh-e zarandud-e tang halqe* زره زراندود تنگ حلقه: a gilded, tightly woven mail.[68]

i. *zerehkolāh* زرهکلاه: head protection made of mail armour; mail coif.[69] It is also called *kolāh zereh* کلاه زره. It is also called *misurka* in the West. Any ring in this mail was called *halqe-ye češm-e zereh* حلقه چشم زره.[70]

j. *zereh dāman* زره دامن: the skirt of mail armour.[71]

k. *češm-e zereh* چشم زره: eye opening in the mail coif.[72]

l. *simin zereh* سیمین زره: silver mail armour; mail armour decorated with silver inlay/overlay.[73]

m. *zarrin zereh* زرین زره: gilded mail armour.[74] It is also called *zereh-i zarrin* زرهی زرین: golden mail armour; mail armour decorated with gold inlay or overlay.[75] It is also called *der'-e mozarrad* درع مزّرد: mail armour with rings.[76]

n. *meškin zereh* مشکین زره: black/dark mail armour; a mail armour with blackened rings.[77]

o. Weapons which were used to penetrate and cut mail armour were called *zerehduz* زره دوز: mail cutter, armour cutter; an arrowhead meant to pierce mail armour[78] and *zerehgozār* زرهگذار: something which pierces the mail armour.[79]

Analysis of Five Mail Armour from a Private Collection in Qazvin, Iran

There are two main types of Persian mail armour. The first and most common type has a frontal opening, with both sides connected via clasps and hooks.[80] This design allows the wearer to put the armour on more easily, similar to a coat, and provides a customisable fit. The second type is a pullover style, which is slipped on over the head

67 Tarsusi A. 1977. 2, 134.

68 Tartusi A. 1977. 3, 365.

69 See: DLD 2026.

70 al-Jāmi M.I.E. 2001, 395.

71 See: DLD 2026.

72 Romuz-e Hamze. 1940, 476.

73 Asadi Tusi H. 1938, 333.

74 Sabā F.X.K., 237.

75 Šabānkāre'i M.A.M. 2002, 278.

76 Manučehri Dāmqāni A.A.G.A. 1984, 18.

77 Asadi Tusi H. 1938, 366.

78 Matufi A. 1999, 446.

79 See: DLD 2026.

80 For a riveted example of this type of Persian mail armour from the Bonyād Museum in Tehran, Iran, see: Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2010, 539, cat. 56. For examples of Persian mail armour with a frontal opening from the Polish collections, see: Chodyński A.R. 2000, 219, cat. 14, 222, cat. 25–26, 223, cat. 27. For an example of a Persian mail armour in the Museum of Bern (Switzerland), see: Zeller R., Rohrer E.F. 1955, table I, table II, table V. For a riveted Persian mail armour of this style from the Military Museum of Bandar Anzali, see: Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2006, 726, cat. 419.

like a traditional hauberk.[81] While the pullover style may offer slightly better structural integrity without a frontal seam, the front-opening type was preferred for convenience, especially when worn over heavy padding or in combination with other armour pieces. The following article analyses five mail armour specimens from a private museum in Qazvin, Iran. Among these, three feature a frontal opening secured by clasps and hooks — the most common Persian design — while the remaining two are pullover-style mail shirts, which lack a frontal seam and are donned over the head.

Particularly important in this regard is the *Tārikh-e Jahāngoshāye Nāderi* by Mohammad Mehdi Khan Estarābādi.[82] The work is especially valuable for the study of Persian military equipment because its illustrations are noted for their relatively realistic depiction of contemporary arms and armour, including complete mail garments. The book depicts both front-opening[83] and pullover forms of mail,[84] providing visual evidence that these two styles were used within the same Persian military tradition. The illustrations further demonstrate that mail could be worn either independently or in combination with *chāhr-āyneh* (four-mirror armour). Some warriors are depicted wearing mail alone, while others are shown wearing mail together with *chāhr-āyneh*,[85] demonstrating that the two forms of protection could be combined when greater coverage was desired. In another depiction, a warrior is shown wearing *chāhr-āyneh* over a padded gambeson,[86] illustrating the variety of protective configurations employed by Persian warriors. These representations indicate that Persian armour was not governed by a single fixed combination of elements but could consist of different layers and components according to circumstance, preference, or military requirement.

Mail Armour Specimens with a Frontal Opening

Minor variations in ring size, rivet form and finishing may further assist in identifying workshop traditions or distinguishing between local manufacture and imported examples.

81 For examples of this style of Persian mail armour in a pullover style in Polish collections, see: Chodyński A.R. 2000, 216, 8, cat. 8, 218, cat 9, 220, cat. 17. For an example of a Persian mail armour in the Museum of Bern (Switzerland), see Zeller R., Rohrer E.F. 1955, table III, 54, fig. 11. For a riveted Persian mail armour of this style in the Military Museum of Shiraz, see: Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2006, 724, cat. 417; for another riveted Persian mail armour from the Military of Bandar Anzali, see: Moshtagh Khorasani M. 2006, 725, cat. 418. This type of mail armour is also shown in the famed Qajar-period painting titled "The Battle of Yerevan" that is kept in the National Museum of Iran, see: Moshtagh Khorasani M., Vladimirovich Gromov A.G. 2025, 214.

82 Esterābādi M.M.M. 1991.

83 Esterābādi M.M.M. 1991, 96, 147.

84 Esterābādi M.M.M. 1991, 147, 357.

85 Esterābādi M.M.M. 1991, 147, 216, 299, 357.

86 Esterābādi M.M.M. 1991, 253.

Mail Armour No. 1

The following is a *nimzereh* (literally 'half mail armour'), a type of Persian mail shirt that covers the torso and extends to half the length of the sleeves. It features a frontal opening secured by two clasps, which allow the two front halves to be fastened together and the armour to be closed securely. The clasp system is designed to hold two sections of the mail together. This clasp consists of two pieces of dark, polished copper. One piece is a rectangular tab with a slot in the centre, and the other is a slightly wider piece with a corresponding protrusion that fits into the slot. Both pieces are secured to the mail by two metal rivets each, their silvery heads providing a stark contrast to the darker copper. In addition, the mail armour incorporates a partial vertical opening at the centre of the back. This feature would have allowed the lower portion of the garment to spread slightly, facilitating greater freedom of movement — particularly lateral motion of the legs — an important consideration in mounted combat or dynamic footwork.

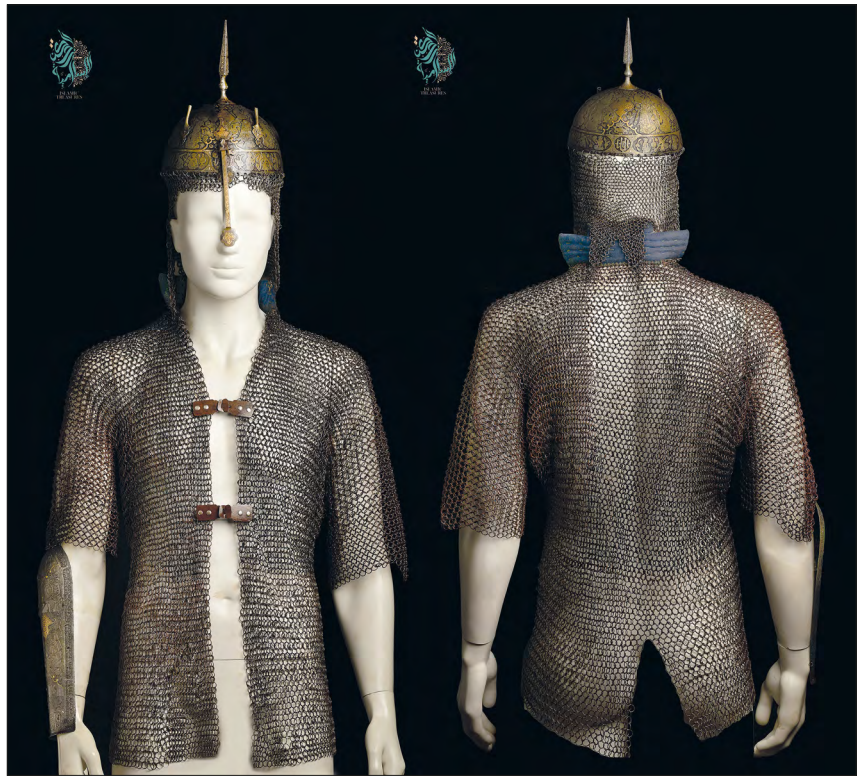

Fig. 1. The front and back sides of mail armour no. 1 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)



Fig. 2. Fully riveted rings in mail armour no. 1 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

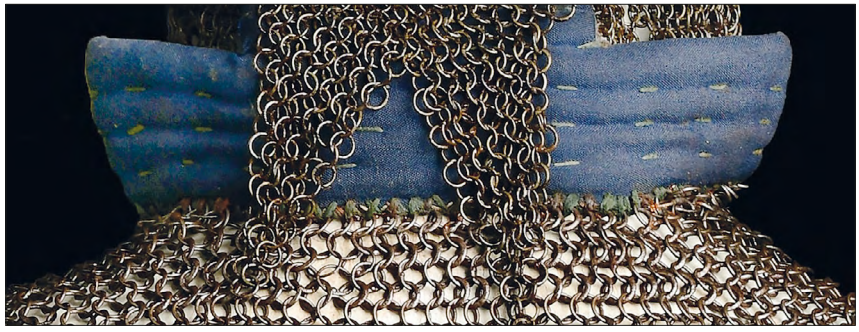

Fig. 3. *Garibān-e zereh* (collar or neck guard) of mail armour no. 1 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

The *garibān-e zereh* (collar or neck guard) of mail no. 1 is made of cotton and felt, dyed blue and attached to the upper edge of the mail. This padded collar provides comfort and protects the neck from chafing and impact. The mail wires are round in cross-section, with rounded rivet heads that lie flush against the ring surface. The armour is constructed in a 1-in-4 riveted ring pattern (each ring is interlinked with four others), and all rings are riveted — meaning no solid (punched or welded) rings are used throughout the entire garment.

Mail Armour No. 2

The second piece is likewise a *nimzereh* (half-mail armour), intended to protect the torso while extending over the upper portions of the arms. It is constructed of riveted mail, with each ring individually secured to enhance structural integrity and improve resistance to penetration.



Fig. 4. Mail armour no. 2 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

The armour features a frontal opening, fitted with two clasps and corresponding rings that allow the garment to be fastened securely while remaining relatively easy to don and remove. This practical closure system reflects a balance between protection and accessibility. The clasp system is designed to hold two sections of the mail together. This clasp consists of two pieces of dark, polished copper. One piece is a rectangular tab with a slot in the centre, and the other is a slightly wider piece with a corresponding protrusion that fits into the slot. Both pieces are secured to the mail by two metal rivets each, their silvery heads providing a stark contrast to the darker copper. In addition, the armour incorporates a partial vertical slit at the centre of the back. This opening enables the lower section of the garment to expand slightly, increasing flexibility and range of motion. Such a feature would have been particularly advantageous during mounted combat, facilitating ease of movement in the saddle, while also supporting agile manoeuvring on foot. The thoughtful integration of these structural elements demonstrates an awareness of both functional mobility and battlefield practicality, suggesting that the piece was designed not only for protection but also for sustained, active use.

The *garibān-e zereh* (collar or neck guard) is separately fashioned from layered cotton and felt, dyed a rich deep blue. This textile component not only cushions the neck and shoulders but also reduces chafing, demonstrating a practical consideration for prolonged wear.



Fig. 5. Neck guard of mail armour no. 2 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)



Fig. 6. Riveted rings in mail armour no. 2 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

The mail itself is composed of rings drawn from round-section wire, each closed with neatly formed, rounded rivet heads, reflecting a high level of craftsmanship. The rings are arranged in the classic 4-in-1 linkage pattern, whereby each ring connects to four adjacent rings, producing a dense yet flexible protective fabric. Minor irregularities in the rings and rivets suggest hand-forging, while the contrast between the cool metallic mesh and the dark blue padded collar adds both functional and visual distinction. Overall, the piece achieves an effective balance between protection, flexibility and wearer comfort, making it suitable for both martial use and formal display.

Mail Armour No. 3

The third example represents a *nimzereh* (half mail armour), designed to cover the torso while extending partially over the upper arms. The armour features a frontal opening secured by three clasps that fasten the opposing edges, facilitating ease of donning and removal while maintaining a secure fit during use. Such closures are consistent with practical adaptations seen in Persian mail garments intended for active combat. The fastenings are made of a reddish-brown copper. Each clasp has a decorative, almost floral or wing-like shape, with a central raised stud or rivet. These decorative elements are asymmetrical and appear to be hand-forged, adding artistry to the functional armour. They are connected by a simple, robust hook and a ring. In addition, the armour incorporates a partial vertical opening at the centre of the back. This feature allows the lower portion of the garment to expand slightly, thereby enhancing freedom of movement — particularly for lateral leg motion — an important consideration for mounted combat as well as agile manoeuvring on foot.

The *garībān-e zereh* (collar or neck guard) is made from layered cotton and felt, dyed a subdued brown. This padded element would have served both to enhance wearer comfort and to mitigate abrasion, while also providing supplementary protection against blunt force and the pressure of the metal links.

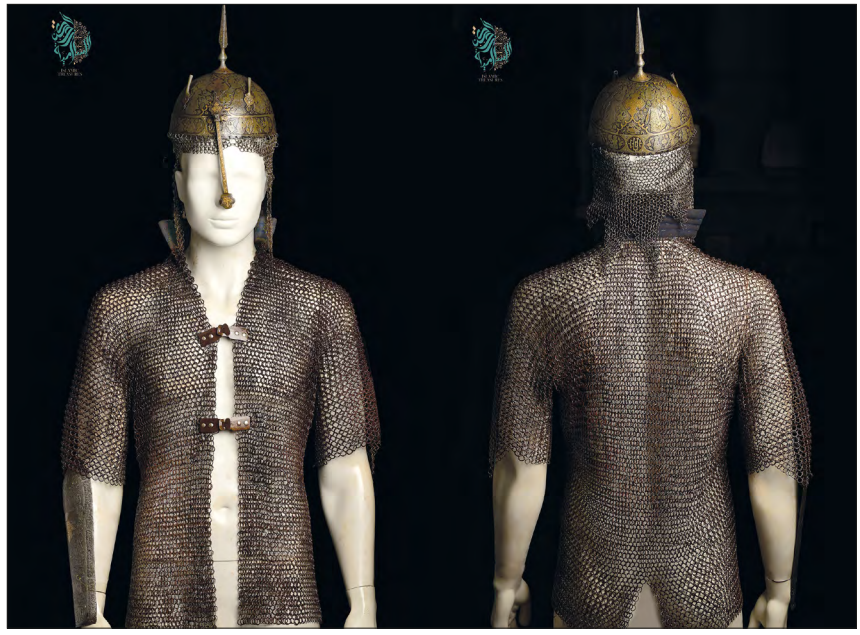

Fig. 7. Front and back views of mail armour no. 3 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

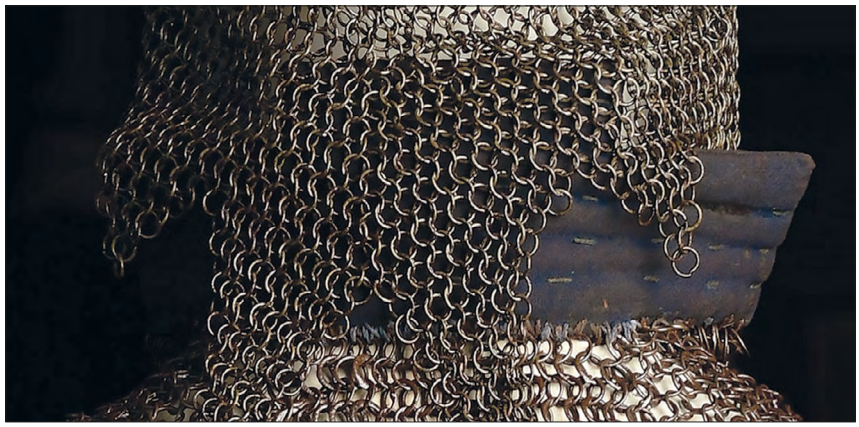

Fig. 8. Neck padding of mail armour no. 3 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)



Fig. 9. Riveted rings in mail armour no. 3 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

The construction consists of riveted rings, reflecting a labour-intensive technique associated with high-quality mail. The individual rings are manufactured from round-section wire and joined with rounded rivet heads, a detail that may offer insight into regional production methods or chronological attribution. The mail is arranged in the classic 1-in-4 linkage pattern, in which each ring interlocks with four others, producing a flexible yet structurally resilient mesh.

Mail Armour No. 4

The fourth example of mail armour belongs to the second type of Persian mail, characterised by its pullover construction. This style is designed to be slipped over the head, similar to a traditional hauberk, and may provide slightly greater structural integrity due to the absence of a full-length frontal seam. This Persian *zereh* (mail armour)

is constructed from durable, riveted rings, forming a garment that balances protection with flexibility. The armour features a carefully designed neck opening, allowing it to be worn easily by pulling it over the head, and it includes long sleeves that extend protection to the arms. Although the armour is primarily of pullover design, it includes a short opening at the back and an additional frontal slit at the centre. These features likely facilitate easier dressing and ventilation without significantly compromising structural cohesion.



Fig. 10. A heavy mail armour with a pullover construction: mail armour no. 4 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

A notable feature is the *garibān-e zereh* (collar or neck guard), constructed from linen and integrated directly into the mail structure. In the neck area, linen elements are interwoven through the mail rings, reinforcing this particularly vulnerable zone while also improving wearer comfort by reducing friction and pressure against the skin. The interwoven section extends in a distinctive V-shape down the spine, reaching below the shoulder blades. This configuration not only enhances structural support in a high-mobility area but also helps distribute weight more evenly across the upper back. Additionally, the use of linen introduces a degree of flexibility and breathability, mitigating heat buildup and allowing for greater ease of movement without compromising protection.

The mail itself is composed of round-section wire rings with rounded rivet heads, arranged in a classic 1-in-4 linking pattern — one of the most widespread and historically effective methods of mail construction. This configuration ensures both strength and mobility, making it suitable for sustained use in combat.

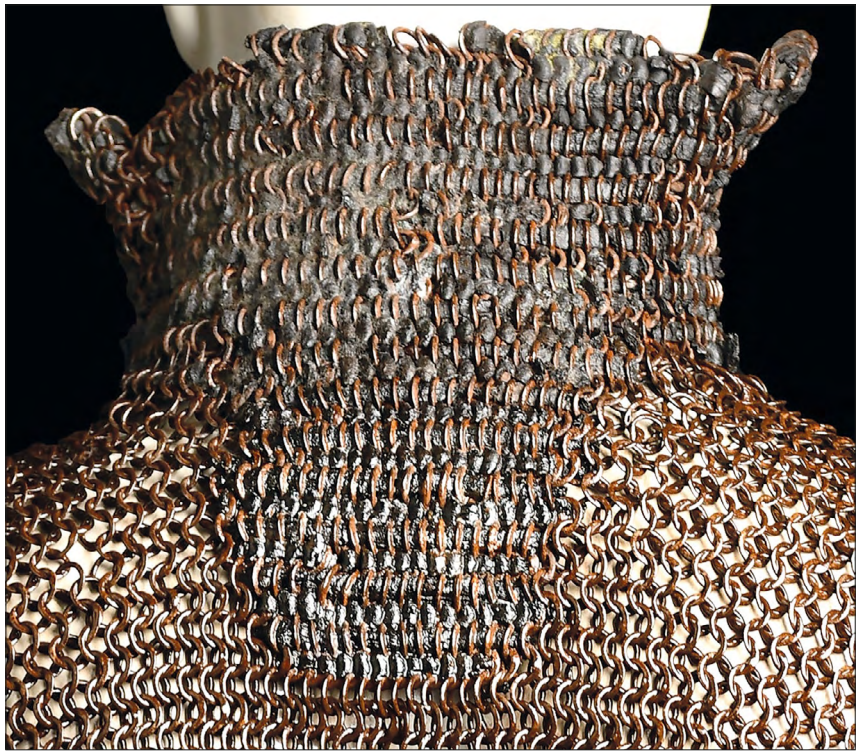

Fig. 11. Neck guard of mail armour no. 4 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

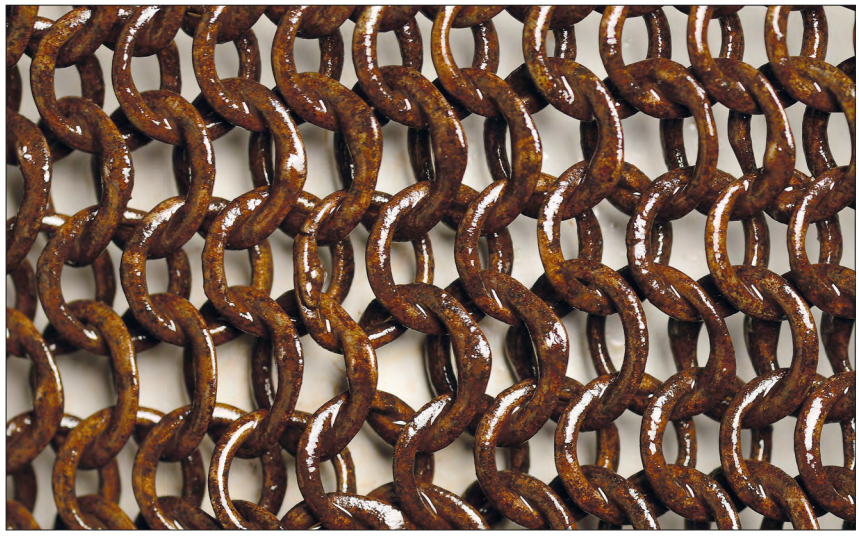

Fig. 12. Close-up of the mail rings in mail armour no. 4 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

The armour has a substantial weight of 13,510 grams (approximately 13.5 kg). This considerable mass can be attributed to two main factors: first, it is a full-length mail garment with long sleeves, providing extensive coverage; and second, the individual rings are notably thick and solid, contributing both to the armour's durability and its overall heaviness.

Overall, this piece exemplifies the craftsmanship and functional design of Persian mail armour, combining robust construction with thoughtful adaptations for comfort and wearability.

Mail Armour No. 5

This Persian *zereh* (mail armour) is constructed from robust riveted iron rings, forming a highly flexible yet resilient protective garment. The structure is carefully engineered to balance mobility with defence, allowing the wearer a wide range of movement while maintaining continuous bodily coverage. The armour features a reinforced neck opening that enables it to be donned by pulling it over the head, a characteristic feature of the second major category of Persian mail, distinguished by its pullover-style construction. Unlike mail coats with a full-frontal opening, this form presents an uninterrupted torso, which likely enhances structural stability by reducing weak points along a central seam. Long sleeves extend protection to the arms, integrating seamlessly into the body of the garment.



Fig. 13. Mail armour no. 5 with a reinforced neck opening (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)



Fig. 14. Neck protection consisting of two layers of riveted mail rings in mail armour no. 5 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)



Fig. 15. Riveted mail rings in mail armour no. 5 (Photo: H.E. Alqarashi; author's picture collection)

At the upper section, the *garibān-e zereh* (mail collar or neck guard) consists of two closely set rows of interlinked rings layered above one another, reinforcing the most vulnerable area around the throat and upper chest.

The rings are manufactured from round-section wire and finished with rounded rivet heads, indicating a refined level of craftsmanship. They are assembled in a 1-in-4 linking pattern, a widely attested configuration in historical mail construction that increases both flexibility and resistance to penetration.

Although primarily a closed, pullover design, the armour incorporates subtle structural openings intended to ease wearability and improve ventilation without significantly compromising its defensive integrity.

Table 1. Dimensions and Weights of Mail Armour

Measurement	Mail no. 1	Mail no. 2	Mail no. 3	Mail no. 4	Mail no. 5
Shoulder to lowest part	64 cm	—	60 cm	75 cm	76 cm
Below armpit to lowest part	—	42 cm	40 cm	52 cm	55 cm
Length below *garibān* to back opening	52.5 cm	—	—	—	—
Neck protection to back opening	—	59 cm	40 cm	—	—
Neck to back opening	—	—	—	—	65 cm
Back opening length	18 cm	—	—	27.5 cm	—
Neck opening to front opening	—	—	—	34 cm	44 cm
Width armpit to armpit	—	57 cm	60 cm	—	61 cm
Width below armpit to front opening	26 cm	—	—	—	—
Shoulder to armpit width	—	—	—	22 cm	—
Midsection width	—	—	—	59.5 cm	—
Sleeve length	—	42 cm	40 cm	—	58 cm
Sleeve width	—	23 cm	—	—	19 cm
Arm width	—	—	15 cm	—	—
Neck protector to sleeve end	—	—	—	67 cm	—
Armpit to side length	41 cm	—	—	—	—
Weight	5570 g	5410 g	3980 g	13510 g	5610 g

Source: Author's own work
Note: — indicates that the measurement was not taken

Conclusion

The five mail armour specimens examined from the private collection in Qazvin provide a valuable and coherent sample for understanding the technical, functional and typological diversity of Persian *zereh*. Taken together, they demonstrate that Persian mail production was not uniform but instead reflected a sophisticated range of solutions adapted to different combat needs, levels of mobility and methods of donning. Across the corpus, two principal structural categories are clearly represented: frontal-opening mail shirts and pullover-style garments. The former prioritises practicality and ease of wear, especially when combined with layered textile padding or additional armour components, while the latter emphasises uninterrupted construction, which may enhance structural cohesion and reduce vulnerability along a central seam. The presence of both types within a single collection highlights the coexistence of alternative design philosophies in Persian armour-making traditions.

All five examples share key technological features characteristic of high-quality Persian mail: riveted iron rings made from round-section wire, rounded rivet heads and predominantly 1-in-4 (four-into-one) linkage patterns. These consistent construction principles indicate a strong continuity in technical knowledge and workshop practice, likely transmitted over long periods and across different production centres. Additionally, subtle variations in ring thickness, weight, finishing quality and textile integration suggest either multiple workshops or differing intended uses, ranging from functional battlefield equipment to potentially more formal applications. Particularly significant is the systematic incorporation of *garibān-e zereh* (neck protection), which appears in all five specimens in varying forms — ranging from padded cotton and felt collars to more structurally integrated linen-reinforced designs. This consistency underscores the recognised vulnerability of the neck and upper chest in mounted combat and reflects a well-developed protective strategy within Persian armour design.

Finally, the considerable variation in weight and construction density — from lighter, more flexible garments to heavier, densely riveted examples — further illustrates the adaptability of Persian mail to different tactical requirements, levels of protection and possibly social or ceremonial contexts. Overall, these five mail armours collectively highlight the technical refinement and adaptability of Persian armourers. They reflect a mature armour tradition in which functionality, ergonomics and protective efficiency were carefully balanced, confirming the important place of Persian *zereh* within the broader history of Islamic and Eurasian military material culture.

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Between Information and Propaganda: Reactions to the Victory at Vienna in 1683 in the Spanish Monarchy

Summary: This article examines the reactions to the victory of the Christian forces at Vienna in 1683 within the Spanish Monarchy. It focuses on the interplay between current informational reports and the propagandistic narrative shaped almost simultaneously by the Madrid court. Despite Spain's lack of direct involvement, the events of the anti-Ottoman campaign aroused considerable interest. Information was disseminated through the press, pamphlets and historical accounts, while the victory quickly became a subject of literary and visual works as well as public celebrations. The festivities in Madrid and Seville were of particular importance, as they incorporated the Viennese victory into the tradition of Spanish struggles against the Islamic world, drawing especially on the memory of the Battle of Lepanto. At the same time, this narrative served current dynastic policy, enabling Charles II to be presented as a full-fledged participant in the triumph of Christianity. An important aspect was the emphasis placed on the position of the Spanish Habsburg line *vis-à-vis* the imperial court in these struggles.

John III Sobieski occupied a prominent place in Spanish representations of the events. He was portrayed as an outstanding commander, a defender of the faith and one of the principal architects of the victory. Prince James Sobieski was also portrayed in a positive light. Unlike imperial propaganda, Spanish representations did not diminish the importance of the Polish monarch but instead placed him on an equal footing with Leopold I. This served not only to acknowledge Sobieski's actual achievements but also to balance the emperor's position. The Spanish reception of the victory at Vienna thus demonstrates how information regarding a military event was rapidly transformed into a multifaceted political and propagandistic narrative.

Keywords: 17th century, Battle of Vienna (1683), Spanish monarchy, John III Sobieski, baroque art, triumphal iconography

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The historical military triumph and the associated need to display personal achievements have remained a constant motif in art since the earliest times. They encompassed diverse mechanisms for constructing visual messages, ranging from compositions of a realist-documentary character, falling within the category of the title's informational function, to representations filled with symbolic and allegorical elements, often subordinated to the needs of propaganda. Early modern ways of depicting battles and their triumphant consequences developed between these two poles. Such representations acquired particular significance within specific historical contexts, being adapted to the needs of the sender and the particular recipient. In such a context, the scale of the success achieved, and its multifaceted meanings contributed to the popularity of the subject itself, whose impact extended far beyond purely visual representation.



Fig. 1. Medal commemorating the victory at Vienna (Jan Höhn, 1683. Public domain)

Similar mechanisms applied to the presentation of the victory of the Christian coalition's forces at Vienna in September 1683, commanded by King John III Sobieski of Poland. From the outset, these accounts combined information with propaganda, serving the political interests of the parties involved. Against this background, the military achievements of the Polish king had already been widely known in Europe, while his role in the victory at Vienna largely marked the culmination of this popularity.[1] This was also influenced by the perception of the victory in the context of the centuries-long, pan-European struggle against Turkish power, for which the Battle

1 Majewski W. 1997, 26; Milewski D. 2013, 75; Czarniecka A. 2017; Nagielski M. 2021.

of Lepanto of 1571 remained a still-living point of reference.[2] For this reason, the universal dimension of the September 1683 success was incorporated into a deliberate policy of propaganda pursued not only by the Polish monarch. The message was disseminated through diverse media, including press reports, ephemeral prints and literary forms to occasional art and representations in painting, graphic art, medallic art and music. Polish scholarship has examined John III Sobieski's deliberate use of information and propaganda, initiated before his coronation and designed to promote his military genius and his role as defender and saviour of Christianity (Fig. 1).[3] The need to make appropriate use of this military success influenced similar actions undertaken by other European courts and leaders.[4]

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the imperial, or more broadly Habsburg, and French courts played a prominent role in this field. The events of 1683 also clearly stimulated the papal court. It is against this background that the activities of the Polish court should be assessed.[5] John Sobieski pursued a deliberate and remarkably modern information policy, evident as early as his tenure as hetman. These activities emphasised several themes, primarily was the promotion of Sobieski as a military commander and, following his coronation, as an effective ruler with superior command abilities. Such efforts were connected with the need to strengthen his internal position, which was associated with promoting dynastic succession to the Polish throne.[6] Another issue was the natural rivalry with other courts and the emphasis placed on Poland's significant position within the anti-Turkish alliance of 1683. Polish scholarship on this subject has primarily examined the propaganda activities of John Sobieski, in relation to Polish policy and the initiatives of the imperial and papal courts. Particular attention is paid to the rivalry between Emperor Leopold I and King John III, which intensified after the victory at Vienna and was reflected in the iconographic solutions promoted by the two sides.[7]

Most of the aforementioned studies focus on assessing these activities in connection with the problems of Central European politics, neglecting a broader approach that takes the pan-European context into account. This study is an attempt to complement this picture with examples of reactions to the Battle of Vienna found in Habsburg-ruled

2 Osiecka-Samsonowicz H. 2012, 297; Altarozzi G. 2017.

3 Newest works: Widacka 2010; Górska M. 2013; Ryszka-Komarnicka A. 2012; Fijałkowski W. 2014; Górska 2017; Boiteux M. 2018; Hulsenboom P. 2019; Jagodziński S. 2021; Telesko W. 2021.

4 Recently, a review of artistic initiatives related to the Battle of Vienna was presented by: Minguez V. 2022.

5 Górska M. 2017, 19–23.

6 Piwarski K. 1933; Wasilewski W. 2014; Skrzypietz A. 2015, 130–149; Bömelburg H.J. 2021; Jagodziński S. 2021.

7 Wrede M. 2013, 22–24. Recently, attention has been drawn to the different leading themes promoted in imperial representations and in those commissioned by John III. The former feature religious themes and those promoting the exceptional dignity of the emperor viewed in a supernatural dimension, whereas the royal commissions are dominated by military and triumphal themes, Jagodziński S. 2021, 147–158.

Spain. These include purely informational representations as well as initiatives falling within the category of occasional art, which permitted an elaborate allegorical and propagandistic message. The representation of Poland and its ruler in Spain offers a valuable perspective on how the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was perceived at the time. This dimension remains largely overlooked in Polish scholarship, which tends to limit its consideration of Habsburg perspectives to relations with the imperial court. Shifting the point of observation to the territories of the Spanish Monarchy enables attention to be drawn to additional circumstances surrounding these events. In the case of the Madrid court, the issues of intra-Habsburg politics and the changes then taking place in relations between Madrid and Vienna were important; the success of the imperial forces against Turkey was a significant catalyst for these changes. Spain had previously been the leading power in the struggle against Turkey and, more broadly, the Islamic world, symbolised by Lepanto. The success of 1683 altered this arrangement, clearly shifting that primacy towards the Empire.[8] The initiatives discussed below were undertaken precisely within this context.

In this study, it is necessary to concentrate on literary representations, descriptions of ceremonies and selected artistic representations relating to the events of 1683.[9] They most often arose as elements complementing large-scale and diverse initiatives. To a considerable extent, these consisted of public ceremonies falling within the sphere of occasional art, press reports and historical-documentary accounts, as well as literary interpretations formulated in response to current events. The proposed survey of objects illustrates diverse mechanisms for exploiting a major military success in which Spain did not participate directly. These were initiatives designed to serve the needs of the state and dynastic propaganda of the moment. The examples discussed enables the identification of ways in which the achievements of King John III Sobieski, one of the most important actors in the events of 1683, were perceived in this context. This can be considered on several levels, first and foremost from a historical-military perspective emphasising the military talents and heroism of the commander of the coalition forces. Furthermore, the campaign and the Battle of Vienna formed part of the broader historical context of the struggle against the Ottoman Empire. This contributed to the lasting memory of the Battle of Vienna and to subsequent eighteenth-century commissions referring to this success. The observations presented below also seem interesting in the context of John Sobieski's well-documented efforts at self-fashioning, initially as hetman and later as King of Poland, directed both at domestic and foreign audiences. Rome, Vienna and Paris played an important role in the Polish monarch's sphere of interest. With the exception of its contacts with the Netherlands,

8 González Cuerva R. 2012, 226–237.

9 In recent years, several important studies have been published in Spain analyzing Spanish reactions to the events of 1683, González Cuerva R. 2012; Ollero Lobato F. 2014; Bravo Lozano C. 2015; Rodriguez Moya I., Minguez V. 2019; Minguez V. 2022.

the Madrid court remained peripheral to these efforts during this period.[10] Spanish interpretations of the victory at Vienna and of the position accorded to the Polish king are therefore particularly interesting, as they were not directly entangled in the diplomatic tensions that were significant for Eastern Europe.

When analysing the repercussions of the 1683 campaign, Spanish scholars emphasise the unprecedented information campaign that accompanied the advance of the allied armies.[11] It enabled multifaceted knowledge of the events and the figures involved. The military operations, their principal actors and their likenesses were therefore known. These included Emperor Leopold I; the commander of the allied forces, King John III Sobieski; the imperial commander, Charles, Duke of Lorraine; and the commander of the Vienna garrison, Count Ernst von Starhemberg. The opposing side was represented by Sultan Mehmed IV, Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa, and the rebellious Hungarian commander Amerigo Thököly. All kinds of celebrations, theatrical representations and iconographic messages organised in honour of the victory incorporated such details. The texts balanced between a chronicle-like account and an ideological interpretation attractive to the local audience. This was particularly significant for the Spanish Monarchy, which, although not directly involved in the war, was traditionally regarded as a defender of Christianity. Moreover, the geographical distance of the events being reported, together with their certain exoticism, gave the representations a greater degree of detachment.[12]

The events of 1683, which unfolded along the Danube, formed part of the broader context of pan-European politics. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the eastward shift of the centre of gravity of the importance of the House of Austria was becoming increasingly apparent. This altered the previous situation in which the Spanish Monarchy, built upon the tradition of the Reconquista, had played a key role in all efforts aimed at defending the Church, especially in confrontation with Islam. In the new situation, King Charles II, involved in conflict with France in the Netherlands, was forced, in the face of the formation of the coalition in 1683, to limit himself to financial support for these efforts amounting to 125,000 escudos and a declaration of the commitment of Spanish ecclesiastical institutions to prayer.[13] Despite its lack of direct participation, Spain followed the course of the campaign with extraordinary attention, among other means through current press reports.[14]

Information regarding the success of the Christian coalition beneath the walls of Vienna reached Madrid as early as 2 October, brought by the cavalry captain Jean-Claude Prudhomme, who had been dispatched from Brussels by the Governor of the

10 Skowron R. 1997, 216–218.

11 Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 223.

12 Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 222–223.

13 González Cuerva R. 2012, 226–237; Bravo Lozano C. 2015, 474.

14 Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 221.

Netherlands, Marquis Otto Ferdinand von Grana, who himself had received the latest information directly from the camp of the coalition forces through the same messenger. This was the moment when spontaneous celebrations of the victory, initiated by the inhabitants, began in the streets of Madrid.[15] In other cities of the monarchy, the news arrived with greater delay, initially in the form of unconfirmed rumours that provoked equally spontaneous reactions. The demand for information was so great that it contributed to the resumption, on 16 November after a lengthy interruption, of the publication of the "Gazeta Nueva Madrit", which reported on the further progress of the campaign, citing accounts taken from letters sent by John III to the pope, Venice and the Netherlands. The same occurred in Seville, where the "Gaceta General" reported on successive stages of the fighting. The numerous bulletins and accounts circulating among readers reflected the great hunger for information experienced in the Spanish lands in connection with the struggle against the Porte.[16]

Over time, efforts were made to organise these reports, also in the form of coherent accounts of military events. In Spain, a key role in disseminating accounts of the victory was played by Francisco Fabro Bremundana the royal secretary and founder of a Madrid newspaper. His account of the anti-Turkish campaign was an expanded Spanish version of an Italian text that compiled and organised smaller notices.[17] The growing references to the Battle of Vienna were not limited to official reports and press texts and soon also appeared in literature, sermons, songs and dramas. Among the latter, the staging of the play *El Sitio de Viena*, which premiered at the Madrid court as early as 22 December 1683, enjoyed particular popularity.[18]

As previously mentioned, the first information regarding the victory reached the Madrid court on 2 October and gradually spread throughout the Spanish lands in the form of unverified rumours provoking spontaneous joy. The king and the court reacted more cautiously to these reports, awaiting imperial correspondence confirming the success, which reached the capital only three weeks later. Only at this point could the official planning of the celebrations begin which was initiated on 6 November. According to the tradition of the Spanish court, in such circumstances a solemn procession of the monarch and his entourage was organised from the Madrid Alcazar to the royal convent of Atocha (*Real Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Atocha*).[19] This type of triumphal procession in the form of a cavalcade was scheduled for 8 November. Under the circumstances, the ceremony acquired particular significance, as it offered an opportunity to promote King Charles II and to place him on an equal footing with other heroes of the events, especially Emperor Leopold I. The importance of

15 González Cuerva R. 2012.

16 Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 221–222.

17 Bremundan F.B. 1684; Martínez Dueñas J.L. 2007, 371–380.

18 Śliziński J. 1976, 349; Klimaszewski B. 1983, 92–93; Śmieja F. 1983, 407–412.

19 Recently, regarding the history and significance of the conven, Atocha 2024.

the planned celebrations and the pan-European dimension of the victory at Vienna created a number of problems concerning the places that the diplomats representing the emperor, the pope and France were to occupy in the cavalcade.[20] Ultimately, the ceremony took place without the presence of the ambassadors, while the papal nuncio, satisfied with the opportunity to preside over the solemn Mass at the Atocha convent, travelled along the same route earlier with a large retinue, thereby securing an individual triumph for himself. The planned celebrations were not limited to the colourful procession as artistic decorations were placed along the route. From surviving accounts, it is known that two crowns attributed to Charles II were displayed in the royal procession: the first belonged to the King of Spain, while the second indicated his role as Emperor of America.[21] Such an arrangement made it possible to depict him alongside Emperor Leopold as an equal representative of the House of Habsburg. The celebrations also employed the symbolic significance of the crowns of the individual monarchies involved in the conflict, which was a permanent element of contemporary iconography.[22] This also appeared in Madrid on 8 November, where, as Ruben González Cuerva emphasised, the ceremony coincided with the feast of *Santi Quattro Coronati*, celebrated on that day which promoted Christian unity and links with the early Christian martyrs.[23] During the cavalcade, this theme was expressed through four crowns: the papal tiara of Innocent XI, the imperial tiara of Leopold I, the crown of the King of Poland, located near the exit onto the Plaza Mayor, and the Spanish crown associated with the symbolism of the "pillar of faith". Other decorations clearly referred to former Spanish rulers and their historical role in the struggle against Islam. Among the images displayed were also those associated with Emperor Charles V, depicting the siege of Tunis and the successful conclusion of the siege of Vienna in 1529.[24] These latter themes clearly juxtaposed the anti-Islamic successes of the great sixteenth-century namesake of King Charles II. From a propagandistic perspective, the juxtaposition of the two sieges of Vienna was equally attractive.

The procession to the royal convent of Atocha reflected the challenges faced by the Madrid court in 1683. Through appropriate decoration and the content displayed, the Spanish ruler could use the ceremony to emphasise his position as a full-fledged participant in the activities of the anti-Turkish coalition. The selection of representations and their historical associations emphatically stressed the position of the Spanish Monarchy within the centuries-long anti-Turkish efforts, which culminated in the

20 A detailed discussion of this issue was provided by Bravo Lozano C. 2015.

21 Bravo Lozano C. 2015, 487.

22 Such a motif was also employed on a medal of Innocent XI from 1684, commemorating the formation of the Holy League. Its reverse depicts an altar surmounted by four crowns: a royal crown, the papal tiara, the imperial crown, and the corno ducale of the Venetian doge, Rokita J.G. 2014, 23–48; Górska M. 2017, 121–125.

23 Dionigi R. 1998.

24 Bravo Lozano C. 2015, 487.

new liberation of Vienna. On the one hand, the ceremony referred to a current event, while on the other it presented the ruler in the context of his foreign policy, both within the European structure and in relations with the other branch of the House of Austria.[25] The prominent role of the pope and of John III is clearly visible in these representations, although in the latter case it differed from the contemporary efforts of imperial propaganda. By presenting these two figures as seemingly equal heroes, the imagery also enabled Charles II to be incorporated into the ranks and his own standing emphasised. The ideological concept present in the Madrid procession was also reflected in other festivities that combined references to current events with religious elements. In many cases, as in Madrid, these took the form of pilgrimages to important local images of the Virgin Mary. Similar processions took place in Seville, Granada, Salamanca and Barcelona.[26] Interest in the success of the Christian forces was also manifested in literary activity: in the final months of 1683, more than twenty printed works referring to the battle and King John III appeared.[27]

The celebrations initiated in Seville had a particularly interesting course and encompassed a series of initiatives such as a panegyric delivered on 10 November by Don Juan Antonio del Alcázar Zúñiga, praising the victory at Vienna.[28] The procession associated with the celebrations was to a considerable extent organised by the *Sacramental del Sagrario de la Catedral* brotherhood based at the cathedral. A permanent element of such celebrations consisted of elaborate, monumental platforms with appropriate artistic decoration. On this occasion, the members of the brotherhood decided to construct a monumental structure in the form of a ship intended to represent the Church.[29] A relatively detailed description of the concept behind these celebrations is contained in a text by Alonso Martín Braones entitled *Lyrica relación de la iesta que la Ilustrissima Hermandad...*, published in Seville in 1683 (Fig. 2).[30] It describes a platform displaying figures of the pope, the emperor, the Kings of Poland and Spain, as well as Prince James Sobieski, among others. The juxtaposition of rulers' images in the context of the religious dimension of the celebration and the significance of the battle itself encouraged the construction of elaborate allegorical interpretations. Ollero Lobato, analysing these celebrations, pointed to comparisons

25 González Cuerva R. 2012, 476; Wheatcroft A. 2009.

26 Analogies to the growing cult of Our Lady of the Snows, Salus Populi Romani, in addition to battle of Lepanto 1571. Fields N. 2021; see: Moisan K.S. 1987.

27 On literary works celebrating the Battle of Vienna in Spain, Śliziński J. 1976, 348–354; Klimaszewski B. 1983, 86–98, 177–181.

28 Śliziński J. 1976, 349–350.

29 The ship-shaped platform was fairly common, appearing at other Spanish celebrations. The same confraternity had previously commissioned a similar 13m structure, designed by Pedro de Borja, for the 1662 celebration of the papal brief on the Immaculate Conception. Given the durability of such costly decorations, it is likely that elements of this earlier structure were reused for the 1683 celebration, Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 231–235.

30 Braones A.M. 1683.

made on this occasion between the principal protagonists and the figures from Ezekiel's vision: John III Sobieski was the valiant Lion, the prudent Duke of Lorraine was associated with the image of the Man, the steadfast and persistent Count Starhemberg was identified with the Ox, while Emperor Leopold was represented by the Eagle.[31] The same scholar linked these celebrations to an extant oil painting entitled *Allegory of the Victory over the Turks and the Liberation of Vienna in 1683*, now held in the Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas in Madrid (Fig. 3, 4).[32] He concluded that the details of the construction, the figures depicted and their arrangement corresponded to the surviving description. He also identified architectural features in the background as depicting the area around Seville Cathedral. The painting in question undoubtedly shows a triumphal scene with a large platform resembling a galley or galleass, with cannon barrels visible through openings in the sides. The platform is being pulled by six young men in Oriental dress, identified as Turks. The individual figures placed on its deck are labelled.[33] On the platform there is a personification of the city of Vienna wearing a *corona muralis*, looking towards a group of figures intended to represent the participants in the campaign. The main scene shows King Charles II kneeling before the enthroned Pope Innocent XI and handing him a document. Around the throne are figures of Emperor Leopold I, the commander of the Vienna garrison, Count Starhemberg, Duke Charles of Lorraine and King John III. To the side, between the personification of Vienna and the main group, is an image of James Sobieski holding a mace in his hand. The King of Spain is shown wearing a black cloak, while the pope is dressed in white pontifical robes. The remaining figures, who were more actively involved in the campaign, are depicted in half-armour. An important element completing the decoration consists of two red banners visible behind the stern of the ship. The one placed higher bears a crucifix, while the lower banner displays three crescents. The banners depicted here linked two great victories over Turkey: that of 1571 at Lepanto and the contemporary victory of 1683 at Vienna. The former was evoked by the ship's form, and the banner bearing the crucifix, alluding to the Christian fleet's standard. The pennant decorated with crescents, on the other hand, may have related to the captured "Banner of the Prophet", sent from the camp near Vienna by King John III to the pope and ceremonially carried through the streets of Rome on 25 September 1683.[34]

31 Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 234–235; see: de Gámiz J. 1684, 4–5.

32 The oil painting on canvas, measuring 124 × 190 cm, by an unknown painter, is dated to around 1683 (inv. no. CE1 7909); Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 234–235.

33 The painting includes appropriate explanations placed next to the individual figures: "Viena de Austria", "Gobernador de la Plaça", "Rey de España", "Hijo del Rey de Polonia", "Emperador Leopoldo", "Ynoxencio undésimo", "Duque de Lorena" and "Rey de Polonia".

34 As early as mid-October 1683, an illustrated publication by Maracci describing the banner in question was published in Rome. Interestingly, for the ceremonial entry of the Polish embassy, the Roman Curia drew on descriptions of the intrada of 1571, Osiecka-Samsonowicz H. 2009, 47–50; see: Żygulski (jun.) Z. 1968; Pasierb J.S., Janocha M. 2000, 119.



A MAYOR GLORIA DE
LA LYRICA
RELACION
DE LA FIESTA,
QVE LA ILVSTRISSIMA
HERMANDAD,
QVE SIEMPRE FERVOROSA
ASSISTE AL CVLTO
DEL SAMTISSMO. SACRAMENTO,
en el Templo del señor San Clemente,
Sagrario de la Santa Patriarchal, y
Metropolitana Igleſia
de Seuilla,
HIZO EN ACCION DE GRACIAS DE LA
célebre victoria, con que fauoreciô Dios nueſtro Señor las
Armas del ſeñor Emperador, governadas por el ſeñor Rey
de Polonia, y ſu Alteza el ſeñor Duque de Lorena, con-
tra el poder Otomano, teniendo ſitiada la
Plaza de Viena, eſte año de 1683.

CON LICENCIA. Impreſſo en Seuilla por *Iuan Franciſco de Blas*, ſu Impreſſor Mayor. Año de 1683.

Fig. 2. Title page of the account of the festivities in Seville in 1683 (Public domain)



Fig. 3. Oil painting probably representing the festivities in Seville in 1683. (*Allegory of the Victory over the Turks and the Liberation of Vienna in 1683*. Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, Madrid. CE17909)



Fig. 4. Oil painting probably representing the festivities in Seville in 1683. Detail showing the figures of the rulers (*Allegory of the Victory over the Turks and the Liberation of Vienna in 1683*. Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, Madrid. CE17909)

The surviving painting is exceptionally interesting and constitutes an important source illustrating the artistic setting of the ceremonies commemorating the victory at Vienna. Its significance obviously derives from the possibility of associating it with specific celebrations organised at Seville Cathedral. It is also important evidence concerning the aforementioned specificity of Spanish propagandistic efforts, which were aimed at emphasising the position of King Charles II among the Christian victors. The manner in which the ruler is shown on the platform, directly addressing the pope, the organiser and head of the Christian coalition, effectively placed him in the position of the victor.[35] This interpretation was also encouraged by the surrounding figures, which placed the other heroes of the Battle of Vienna on an equal footing. The form of the platform and its context once again suggested associations with the more Spanish victory at Lepanto.[36] From the perspective of Polish interests, an important motif is the clearly equal treatment of the emperor and the King of Poland. Another significant addition appearing in this arrangement was the separate figure of Prince James, emphasising his importance in the Vienna campaign and harmonising with the pro-dynastic efforts of the Polish court at the time.[37]

Among the events that offered an immediate account and interpretation of the victory at Vienna was the dramatic work *El Sitio de Viena*. The play was staged in Madrid only three months after the battle, on 22 December 1683, on the birthday of Queen Mariana Theresa of Austria. The drama is attributed to Pedro de Arca, who served as a *Regidor* (councillor) in Madrid and had connections with Calderón.[38] Florian Śmieja emphasised that it was a simple dramatisation of the news reaching the European courts. The scholar considered that, in this case, the basis may have been the report of the Spanish ambassador in Vienna, the Marquis of Borgomanero.[39] The premiere of 22 December was produced by the company of Manuel Vallejo and Francisco la Bezona and staged in the Golden Chamber of the Royal Alcazar.[40] The play was published in two parts, in January and April 1684. Its second part, *La comedia segunda parte del Sitio de Viena, y conquista de Estrigonia*, recalled the capture of Esztergom on 26 September 1683 and was also performed at court.[41]

In the drama of December 1683, the principal character was King John III, around whom the narrative revolved. The story began in the palace of the Polish ruler, who, together with his son, received an envoy of Emperor Leopold I. The text portrayed Sobieski as the noble defender of Christianity, who embarked with his son on an

35 González Cuerva R. 2012, 491.

36 Rodriguez Moya I., Minguez V. 2019, 337–339; Strunck Ch. 2011.

37 Skrzypietz A. 2014, 144–145.

38 Śmieja F. 1983, 407.

39 Cremonini C. 2015, 183–208.

40 González Cuerva R. 2012, 490.

41 Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 222.

expedition against the infidels. The personal bravery of the commander during the Battle of Vienna was emphasised, culminating in the capture of a Turkish banner — an episode clearly echoing the famous trophy sent by Sobieski to Rome. The play also contained scenes illustrating subsequent events, including Sobieski's meeting with the emperor. Two semicircles of dignitaries representing the two sides of the coalition were portrayed here. The emperor and the king were to meet at the centre of the stage. As Śmieja observed, "the exchange of studied compliments that followed must have been entirely clear to the audience: Sobieski was a commander and personally went into battle".[42] In the play, the emperor was to embrace the prince Alexander, a character corresponding in reality to James Sobieski. This was a significant scene given reports that the emperor was said to have ignored or failed to acknowledge the prince in person.[43] Śmieja argued that the play generally recognised the role of the King of Poland and presented it appropriately.[44] In his interpretation of the drama, the scholar clearly concentrated on the Polish point of reference, which resulted from his knowledge of the contemporary narrative of the imperial court, which systematically downplayed the position of the Polish king. The scholar paid less attention to the internal needs of Madrid in 1683.

Spanish scholars, by contrast, construct their analyses differently, focusing on the political concerns of the Spanish court, which sought to exploit the victory at Vienna for its own purposes. This placed the literary work discussed here within the broader context of contemporary initiatives emphasising the position of the young King Charles II. In this interpretation, the staging made it possible to place him on an equal footing with the emperor, presenting him as a triumphant figure within the Habsburg community. It is known that during the Madrid premiere the front of the stage took the form of a temple of Mars, while the curtain was decorated with symbols of the Sun and an eclipsed Moon.[45] The proposed decoration and its symbolic references, together with the date of the premiere coinciding with the birthday of the queen mother, carried dynastic and political significance. They situated the King of Spain in the context of the great military success associated with the imperial line of the House of Habsburg. Queen Maria was its representative at the Spanish court, embodying the connection between the two branches. The same narrative elements appeared in the drama itself, clearly emphasising the role of the Spanish Monarchy.[46] From this perspective, the question of the prominence accorded to John III is noteworthy,

42 Śmieja F. 1983, 409.

43 Jan Sobieski 1962, 527; Barker T.M. 1967, 342–344; Skrzypietz A. 2011, 129–134.

44 Śmieja F. 1983, 410.

45 Regarding references to the symbolism of the aforementioned celestial bodies at the Spanish court, Mínguez V. 1993, 29–46; Minguez V. 2001; see: Górska M. 2017, 98–107.

46 Later, these efforts would reach their culmination with the capture of Buda, an event in which a small Spanish contingent would take part, Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 227.

in a manner different from that of imperial propaganda, which diminished the king's position and reduced him more to the role of a military instrument of imperial will.[47] It appears that in the Spanish narrative the clear juxtaposition of Sobieski with Leopold did not result merely from a special emphasis on Sobieski's role, but rather from the use of the Polish ruler to balance the emperor's position, thereby creating an opportunity to position Charles II appropriately. Cuerva interprets the aforementioned painting illustrating the triumph at Seville in the same spirit, highlighting that the kneeling King of Spain effectively occupied the position of the actual victor, relegating the other, genuine actors in the events at Vienna to the background.[48]

Most of the examples discussed above belonged to the category of occasional, ephemeral art, whose traces remained at the level of literary accounts. A rather exceptional significance in this group belongs to the painting preserved in Madrid depicting a platform with the principal figures of the events. Knowledge of these individuals and their portraits played a fundamental role in all efforts aimed at informing the public and commemorating the events. Images of this type were disseminated through graphic representations and were widely available. The ways in which they were juxtaposed and the importance assigned to particular individuals were also significant. In Spain, an important place in this field was occupied by the graphic design accompanying the aforementioned publishing initiative of Francisco Fabro Bremundan.[49] The frontispiece of the 1684 edition of the first part of *Floro Historico* contained portraits of the coalition leaders in the form of six medallions, three in each of two rows (Fig. 5). In the upper row, Emperor Leopold I was depicted in the centre, flanked by portraits of the Electors of Bavaria and Saxony. Above Leopold's distinctly larger medallion was the imperial mitre held by putti carrying a sword and sceptre. In the centre of the lower row, likewise in an enlarged medallion, was the King of Poland, while the Duke of Lorraine, Charles, and Count Starhemberg were depicted on either side. Directly above them was an eagle with outspread wings bending its head towards John III. The published set of portraits corresponded to the political situation of the time, depicting the participants in the fighting of 1683 and clearly emphasising the roles of the emperor and King John III. In the edition of the subsequent part of the work, published in 1686 and reporting on events from 1684–1685, a frontispiece with a changed set of portraits was used, adapted to the new political situation and to the composition of the newly established Holy League (Fig. 6). The engraving was made by Juan Francisco Leonard. The composition once again employed medallions, with the central position in the upper row occupied by the pope, flanked by the emperor and the King of Poland. In the lower row, the Elector of Bavaria was

47 Osiecka-Samsonowicz H. 2009; Jagodziński S. 2021, 149–159.

48 González Cuerva R. 2012, 491.

49 Bremundan F.B. 1684.

depicted in the centre, with Charles, Duke of Lorraine, and Francesco Morosini, the future Doge of Venice, on either side. The shift of emphasis towards Innocent XI resulted from the recognition of his role in the formation of the Holy League and made it possible to interpret the successes against the Turks in terms of the Church Triumphant. This change of emphasis permitted a shift in the narrative from pure factual description towards the realms of spiritual and symbolic inquiry. It also altered the position of the King of Poland, who, at the call of the Church, abandoned his safe kingdom and embarked to fight evil.[50]



Fig. 5. Frontispiece of Francisco Fabro Bremundán's work — 1684 edition (*Floro Historico de la Guerra Movida por El Turco Contra El Señor Emperador*. Public domain)



Fig. 6. Frontispiece of Francisco Fabro Bremundán's work — 1686 edition (*Floro Historico de la Guerra Movida por El Turco Contra El Señor Emperador*. Public domain)

It is known that the examples mentioned do not exhaust the Spanish list of works created as forms of commemoration of the victory at Vienna. Reference could be made to a painting commissioned after 1683 from the painter Francisco Rizi, depicting an allegorical siege and liberation of Vienna. The large-scale work, which has not

50 An analysis of such references can be found in the study, see: Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 227.

survived, was originally located in the Royal Alcazar of Madrid and remained unfinished in 1686.[51] It is also worth emphasising that references to the Vienna campaign played an important role in the Americas as well. Among such objects are screens from Mexico made using the *enconchado* technique, associated with Gonzales and Miguel y Juan, which after 1683 addressed the subject of the siege of Vienna and subsequent episodes of the anti-Turkish campaign.[52] The detailed representations were based on prints by Romeyn de Hooghe. The universal dimension of the events of 1683 also encouraged the production of paintings depicting St James fighting the infidels (*Santiago Matamoros*). This highly popular motif in Spain was also used in the Americas, including in a painting from around 1690 depicting the legendary medieval battle with the Moors at Clavijo, where Christian victory was made possible through the intervention of the saint. In the 1690 painting, the opponents of the Christians were clearly depicted as Turks. A clear reference to St James as an active warrior fighting the infidels also appeared in a composition devoted to King John III, an example of which is Kuropatnicki's graphic thesis of 1682.[53] In this image, emphasising victory over the Turks, Prince James is also prominently displayed and clearly juxtaposed with the patron saint. This is an interesting example of the interpenetration of certain motifs that became attractive within the framework of the common struggle against the Porte. Polish commissioners explicitly invoked the patronage of the Spanish warrior saint James while in Spanish works, the prominent position accorded to Prince James is particularly noteworthy.

In the interpretations of Spanish scholars, reactions to the victory at Vienna passed through various stages, from a purely informational phase based on press reports describing the events, to the allegorisation and sacralisation of military events. Such efforts made it possible to propagandistically elevate the Habsburgs, but above all to incorporate the celebrated successes into a sequence of achievements attributed to Charles II. Another interesting issue is the durability of the memory of the Vienna campaign and the significance played by the King of Poland, as demonstrated by eighteenth-century commissions for portraits of the Polish monarch.[54] The manner in which John III was depicted in Spanish iconographic representations was to some extent a product of his pan-European iconography. In these representations he was treated in a rather distinctive manner, with an Orientalising costume and moustache clearly distinguishing him from other Western commanders. His personal involvement

51 In the inventories, the width of the painting was given as 5 varas (approximately 83 cm each), and its height as more than 3 m, Bottineau Y. 1958; Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 226.

52 Vargas Lugo E. 1994, 123; Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 227.

53 Górska M. 2017; see: Hulsenboom P. 2019, 95–96.

54 A commission from 1759: Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza: Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, OSUNA, CT.516, D.38–40, Dos recibos firmados por Antonio de Fontanille, importe de dos retratos: uno del Rey de Polonia Juan Sobresqui y otro del Conde de Benavente. I am very grateful to Dr Ewa Kubiak for this information.

in the battle was widely known and, combined with his depiction carrying a crucifix on one of his shoulders, allowed him to be associated with the crusaders of the past. In Paul Kléber Monod's interpretation, John III could be perceived as a model strong Catholic king, understood as an envoy of God, a second John after the first, Juan de Toledo, the victor at Lepanto.[55] Another interesting theme present in Spanish objects is the strongly emphasised position of Prince James, depicted in a highly positive light as the valiant battle companion of his famous father. This is particularly interesting in view of the generally negative narrative promoted by the imperial court on this matter. This discrepancy may illustrate the differing needs of the court of the Spanish Habsburgs at the time.

The Spanish examples presented bear witness to the enormous interest that accompanied the struggle against Turkey. This can be seen at the level of the ongoing flow of information, which stimulated the development of the Spanish press. Another phenomenon was the almost immediate interpretation of the unfolding events in a manner attractive to the Spanish court. Official celebrations, the allegorical programmes accompanying them, and literary representations emphasised the position of King Charles II, which formed part of the current of official state propaganda. A particularly interesting aspect of these activities is the highly positive presentation of the role of John III and Prince James, which differed from the parallel activities of the imperial court. It appears that this positive treatment resulted not only from Sobieski's actual role in the campaign but also made it possible to balance the significance of the emperor, which was important from the perspective of Spain's previous leadership in the struggle against the Islamic world.

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55 Monod P.K. 1999; Ollero Lobato F. 2014, 225.

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The Town of Turnu Măgurele and its Role in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878

Summary: Turnu Măgurele played a significant role in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, which resulted in Romania becoming an independent state. The city's importance stemmed primarily from its location as a Danube port and its infrastructure. Consequently, Turnu Măgurele served as a staging ground where not only Russian and Romanian troops concentrated before crossing the river but also where essential war resources were amassed. Depots for weaponry, food, and fodder were established in the city to collect local donations and requisitioned supplies for distribution to the soldiers. Romanian forces launched artillery strikes from the town against the Ottoman bank of the Danube, securing the river crossing and facilitating the Russian army's capture of Nikopol. Turnu Măgurele also hosted high-ranking Romanian and foreign civil and military officials, alongside newspaper correspondents, artists and writers eager to witness the war firsthand. Additionally, a major medical hub was established in the city, comprising several hospitals where thousands of soldiers received treatment.
Keywords: Turnu Măgurele, independence, Russo-Turkish War, soldier, hospital

Introduction

As the title suggests, this analysis aims to highlight the connection between the city of Turnu Măgurele and the military conflict of 1877–1878, an event of particular significance for Romanians, as it resulted in the attainment of state independence from

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the Ottoman Empire.[1] As a result of this war, not only Romania's political status changed but also its territory, with the peace treaties of San Stefano and Berlin stipulating the acquisition of Dobruja and the loss of the southern part of Bessarabia.[2] The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 led to Serbia and Montenegro gaining independence and the emergence of the Principality of Bulgaria, while also marking a moment of reaffirmed Russian authority in Southeast Europe, coinciding with the deepening crisis of the Ottoman Empire.

This study does not aim to reconstruct the course of the war in question, although reference to the broader context of events is unavoidable.

The aim was to highlight the role played by Turnu Măgurele in this military conflict. While this approach might seem narrow, the analysis proved its validity given that the town was involved in the war in several respects. As a Danube port, the town served as a crossing point for troops moving into Ottoman territory. Furthermore, the city possessed the necessary infrastructure to serve as a hub for the food and munitions supplies required by Russian and Romanian soldiers in their fight against the Turks. Hospitals were also established there to provide medical care. Turnu Măgurele also served as a temporary base for the military commanders involved in the war, as well as for correspondents from major domestic and international newspapers. These factors, along with other aspects covered in the article, prompted this analysis.

Brief Overview of the City of Turnu Măgurele

Before outlining Turnu Măgurele's role in that war, it is necessary to provide some background on the city, originally known as Turnu Romulus. In the 15th century, the settlement was conquered by the Turks and became a district of Nicopolis. This status remained unchanged until 1829, when, following the Treaty of Adrianople, the city was returned to Wallachia. The historian Nicolae Iorga listed the various powers that held Turnu Măgurele over time, noting that the city "was an ancient military outpost for the Latin Romans, the Greek Romans, the barbarians and the Turks."[3] In other words, the town served as a gateway and a checkpoint for Romanian territory, functioning as a port on the Danube, the river that separated the Romanians from the Turks.

1 At the same time, Serbia and Montenegro became independent, and Bulgaria became an autonomous principality. Ciachir N. 1970, 82–83.

2 Darras É. 1900, 66.

3 Iorga N. 1972, 156.

The settlement was granted town status in 1829 and became the seat of Teleorman County[4] in 1846, enjoying economic prosperity driven by the grain trade. Located in the country's southwest, near the confluence of the Olt[5] and the Danube, the town had a small population; in 1865, it numbered 2,975 inhabitants.[6] It is worth noting that the city possessed institutions and infrastructure that proved valuable during the war. Regarding infrastructure, the Costești–Turnu Măgurele railway line terminated here; furthermore, there was a road following the railway's route, complemented by several other roads (Alexandria–Turnu Măgurele and Turnu Măgurele–Elisabeta[7]) and a bridge connecting the two banks of the Danube.[8]

Romania's Political Status and the Preliminaries to the Russo-Turkish War

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 marked the culmination of events related to the Eastern Question. Events in the Balkan Peninsula began in 1875 with the uprising of the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina against the Turks. The following year, Serbs and Bulgarians joined them[9] but the uprisings went beyond mere internal conflicts between Balkan peoples and Ottoman authorities. The situation became complicated, and the conflict escalated due to Russian intervention, officially undertaken to protect the interests of Christian populations in the Balkan Peninsula.[10]

The Romanians were under Ottoman suzerainty at the time, paying tribute in exchange for protection, but the Ottoman Empire did not recognise the Romanian state's right to have its own foreign policy. Nevertheless, after 1866, Romanians intensified their efforts to achieve independence through diplomatic means. The rejection of their petitions and the Ottoman insistence on regarding Romania as an autonomous province of the empire drove the Romanians to fight for their objective. They initially sought to ally themselves with the Christian peoples of the Balkan Peninsula and launch an anti-Ottoman offensive;[11] however, the plan failed, as only the Serbs proved receptive to the Romanian proposals, leading to the conclusion of a military

4 Teleorman County — county of Romania on the border with Bulgaria, in the historical region Muntenia, with its capital city at Alexandria.

5 The Olt — river in Romania, originating in the Giurgeu Mountains, in the Eastern Carpathians. The river traverses the counties of Harghita, Covasna, Brașov, Sibiu, Vâlcea, and Olt.

6 Polihroniade M., Tell A.C. 1937, 55.

7 At the end of the 19th century, it was a commune in Călmățui (Teleorman County), comprising the villages of Plopi and Slăvitești. Subsequently, it was incorporated into Turnu-Măgurele and ceased to exist during the second half of the 20th century.

8 Buzoianu G.T. 1894, 135.

9 Berstein S., Milza P. 1889, 182.

10 Berindei D. 1997, 122.

11 Stofella E. 1888, 191.

cooperation treaty with the Serbs in 1869. This was not enough for the Romanians to hope for liberation from Turkish rule without the support of a major European power.

Consequently, the prospect of a Russo-Turkish war fuelled Romanian hopes that fighting alongside the Russians could lead to independence but their proposal for military cooperation with the Tsar's army was initially rejected, with the Russians preferring instead to conclude a convention on 4 April 1877, that allowed for the transit of troops through Romania. The terms of the convention favoured Russia, granting it access to the country's railway network (at rates 40% lower than standard), river transport, postal and telegraph services and material resources.[12] Although no explicit military obligations were imposed on Romania, they were implied. This situation complicated relations with the Ottoman Empire, which viewed the signing of the convention as a hostile act, given the strategic advantages it offered the Russian armies.

Relations with Russia were also a source of frustration for Romanians; however, the Tsar's attitude towards Romania changed radically following the failure at Pleven, at which point the active participation of Romanian troops in the fighting was accepted. This paved the way for Romania to secure its independence on the battlefield.

It is worth noting that a link existed between the locality analysed and events in the Balkans even before Romania officially entered the war. Several Bulgarians, such as Sava Mladenov and Vasil Levski, who were involved in organising the 1876 uprising, lived there. With the support of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee in Bucharest and the tacit consent of the Romanian authorities, the two men helped several hundred Bulgarians enter Romania between 1869 and 1873 to arm and train for combat, preparations that later enabled them to launch the struggle against the Turks, under the leadership of Hristo Botev.[13] Another link to the events in the region was the fact that one-third of the 300 Bulgarian volunteers who returned to the Ottoman Empire in 1876 crossed the Danube near the town of Turnu Măgurele.[14]

Before the war, the town attracted particular attention not only from Balkan volunteers but also from the Romanian authorities, who anticipated that the locality would play a significant role in the conflict. This is evidenced by the decree of 26 November 1876, which doubled local military forces through the establishment of eight additional infantry regiments. The decree also noted the existence of a battalion belonging to the 5th Infantry Regiment.[15] The battalion comprised eight companies, the first of which was the Turnu Măgurele company, which was also garrisoned in that town.[16]

12 Focșeneanu I. 1957, 175.

13 Perry D. 1993, 23.

14 Mardale A. et al. 1977, 30.

15 The 5th Infantry Regiment was stationed at Giurgiu and covered the counties of Teleorman and Vlașca.

16 DPIR. RI 1(2). 1954a, 481.

The presence of these military units proved useful, given that Turnu Măgurele — along with other towns on the left bank of the Danube (Bechet, Corabia, Giurgiu) — had become a target for Turkish attacks.[17] This situation arose following Russia's declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire on 12/24 April 1877, and the fact that Romanian authorities took no action to prevent the advance of Russian troops across the country's territory. Consequently, the Ottoman Empire deemed it legitimate to penalise Romania for collaborating with the enemy;[18] however, the Turkish decision to occupy Calafat, Turnu Măgurele and Oltenița[19] did not surprise the Romanian government as it had already been informed of such a possibility on 3 April by Ion Bălăceanu, the diplomatic agent in Vienna.[20]

The Initial Effects of the War and the Reaction of the Authorities

Tensions between the Romanians and the Ottoman Empire were further exacerbated by a demand that ships anchored at Turnu Măgurele proceed to Turkish ports, under threat of having their cargo confiscated. Predictably, this measure alarmed the merchants; eager to recover the goods loaded onto those vessels, they asked the Prefect of Teleorman County to have the products transported to the town's warehouses and to use force if the captains refused to surrender the cargo.[21] The situation worsened when the Turks began shelling along the Danube, endangering the grain ships; two barges were sunk on 23 May 1877, near the natural harbour of Cătina, close to Turnu Măgurele.[22] At the same time, irregular bands of Bashi-bazouks[23] repeatedly crossed the Danube by boat, with the ensuing looting, abductions and military clashes affecting both the town and its surrounding areas.[24] These incursions alarmed the inhabitants, who anticipated a possible Ottoman invasion and a significant number of citizens deserted the town for safer locations within the county.[25] Gheorghe Kirițescu, the prefect of Teleorman County, took measures to bolster security in the town; on 9 April 1877, he requested troops from the Ministry of the Interior to reinforce outposts, as well as an infantry garrison to be stationed at Turnu Măgurele.[26] A decision was made to

17 Gheorghiu Al.A. 1932, 86.

18 Potel A. 1889, 139.

19 Romanian towns on the left bank of the Danube.

20 Olteanu C. et al. 1977, 66.

21 DPIR. RI 2. 1952, 218.

22 Mardale A. et al. 1977, 141.

23 Turkish volunteers who lived off looting and war spoils.

24 Vintilă P., Vintilă P. jr. 1977, 16.

25 Rosetti R. 1928a, 134.

26 DPIR. RI 2. 1952, 159.

strengthen the garrisons at Calafat and Giurgiu and to establish a reserve force of 20,000 soldiers in Oltenia, near Craiova.[27]

Civilian anxiety also led to a proposal in April 1877, to ban the entry into Romania of individuals arriving from the Ottoman Empire due to suspicions of espionage. To illustrate the atmosphere of mistrust among the population, six Bulgarians were arrested in Turnu Măgurele on this charge. They were released only after being interrogated and proving that they were not spies, but gardeners who, fearing the Turks, had fled across the river in search of a safer place.[28]

In a further effort to reassure the townspeople, the prefect decided that administrative institutions would continue their operations in Turnu Măgurele, with only the archives of the Town Hall and the Prefecture being transferred to Alexandria.[29] For their part, the town's residents took action by forming citizens' militias to intervene against raiders from across the Danube.[30] A sense of security was provided between 15 and 26 April 1877, when the 8th Line Regiment was stationed in the town, conducting tactical exercises and undergoing inspection by Prince Carol I.[31]

Romanians in Military Operations during the Russo-Turkish War

Provocations by the Turks concerned not only local authorities but the entire political class; Parliament called upon the government to clarify its position regarding the Ottoman Constitution of 16 December 1876,[32] Turkey's diplomatic hostility and military operations along the Danube.[33] These discussions culminated in a statement by Foreign Minister Mihail Kogălniceanu, who, on 9 May 1877, proclaimed the end of the state of subordination to the Ottoman Empire ("We are a free and independent nation!"[34]). At the same time, upon the proposal of deputy Nicolae Fleva, the tribute (914,000 lei) was reallocated to the Ministry of War to fund the struggle against the Turks.

War between Romania and the Ottoman Empire was officially declared on 30 April / 12 May 1877; mobilisation was ordered simultaneously and lists were compiled of the conscripted peasants whose families were to receive assistance with agricultural work.[35]

27 Popi G. 1977, 1247.

28 DPIR. RI 3. 1953a, 41.

29 DPIR. RI 2. 1952, 484.

30 Rosetti R. 1928b, 11.

31 DPIR. RI 3. 1953a, 452.

32 This indicates that Romania was a privileged province of the empire, and that Romanians were subjects of the Sultan with representatives in a future multinational parliament.

33 ANR MI 5177. 1877, 106.

34 Kogălniceanu M. 1978, 479.

35 SJTAN PTM 1. 1877, 2.

With Romania's entry into the war, the strategic importance of the town grew significantly due to the bridge connecting the banks of the Danube and the concentration of reserve troops in the area. These troops were prepared to intervene along the axes of Lom–Palanca–Vidin, Veliko Tarnovo–Sofia (via Pleven), or towards Shumen (via the Shipka Pass), thereby securing the rear of the Romanian and Russian forces engaged at the front.

At the same time, the headquarters of the 3rd Division was established and the town became a key hub for supplying the front with soldiers and provisions. It is worth noting that on 19 April 1877, significant quantities of produce were located here: 200 kg of wheat, 600 kg of barley, 500 kg of corn, 400 cartloads of hay and 800 cartloads of straw.[36]

The town's role in the transmission of information during these events cannot be overlooked. Measures were taken to improve postal and telegraphic communications, including the establishment of a telegraph line between Măgurele and Poradim[37] and an increase in the frequency of the stagecoach runs that transported the mail.[38]

The town faced additional challenges when it hosted the Russian Army's General Headquarters, Tsar Alexander II, and his brother, Grand Duke Nicholas, between 14 and 16 June 1877. The same town was required to provide logistical and military support to the Russian troops crossing the Danube on the night of 14–15 June 1877, at the Zimnicea[39] — Svishtov crossing point; during this operation, the artillery of the Romanian 4th Division joined Russian batteries at Flămânda and Turnu Măgurele to stage a diversion (specifically, the bombardment of the Nicopolis fortress), intended to mislead the enemy regarding the location where the Russians would cross the river.[40]

The operation succeeded and was complemented by further actions. Consequently, the 7th Line Regiment, commanded by Colonel Grigore Cantilli, crossed the Olt River at Turnu Măgurele, a manoeuvre that expanded the Romanian army's capacity to provide cover for the Russian forces from Corabia, Turnu Măgurele and Flămânda. General George Manu's Romanian 4th Division occupied positions east of Turnu Măgurele, in the area previously held by the Russian 9th Army Corps.[41]

As expected, troop movements affected this town, which had to provide accommodation and food for thousands of soldiers so depots for meat and bread were established.[42]

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36 DPIR. RI 2. 1952, 286.

37 Poradim or Pordim — town in Pleven Province in central northern Bulgaria and the administrative centre of Pordim Municipality.

38 Vintilă P., Vintilă P. 1977, 209.

39 Zimnicea — southernmost city in Romania, located in Teleorman County on the left bank of the Danube, opposite the Bulgarian city of Svishtov.

40 Mardale A. et al. 1977, 146.

41 Olteanu C. et al. 1977, 151.

42 SJTAN PTM 2. 1877, 5; SJTAN PTM 675. 1877, 122.

The first clash between the Romanian army and Turkish monitors took place on 4 June 1877, near Islaz (a commune located close to the town). It was during this engagement that the first soldier from Teleorman County lost his life, Sergeant Florea Blejan, whose post was struck by a bomb fired from the Turkish ships *Scadra* and *Podgoritza*.[43]

Romanian artillery proved its effectiveness both during the Russian crossing of the Danube and actively supporting the assault on Nicopolis. Starting on 13 June 1877, Romanian artillery kept a continuous barrage against the fortress, preventing the Turks from sending reinforcements to their compatriots. Significant bombardments of Nicopolis included those on 30 June and 3–4 July involving the following Romanian units: the 5th and 7th Line Infantry Regiments, the 5th Battery of the 3rd Artillery Regiment, the 4th Battery of the 4th Regiment, and the Teleorman Cavalry Squadron.[44] This intense activity significantly depleted the Romanian army's ammunition stocks, necessitating rationing measures.[45] At the same time, under the cover of heavy fire from Romanian batteries at Islaz,[46] Turnu Măgurele and Flămânda,[47] it was possible to transport the rafts and pontoons required to build the bridge at Zimnicea.[48]

Romanian artillery bombarded not only Nicopolis but also the fortifications at Osam and Cherkovitsa which enabled the Russians to advance with greater safety towards the Ottoman Empire, where they launched an attack on Nicopolis.[49] For several days, troops along the Danube line exchanged artillery fire, causing damage on both sides. At Turnu Măgurele, Mayor Mihail Elefterescu recorded on 19 June that twelve shells had landed in the town, partially destroying the public girls' school, a warehouse and the private home of Zaharia Mavromati. Otherwise, the other shells, which fell in the streets and gardens, caused no further damage; there were no fatalities or injuries.[50] The limited damage was due to the town's location, situated at a greater distance from Nicopolis and more sheltered.[51] The situation was different at Giurgiu, where buildings, streets and gardens were reduced to rubble[52] by bombshells fired by the Turks from Ruse (Ruschuk).

43 Coșbuc G. 1899, 206.

44 DPIR. RI 4. 1953b, 391.

45 DPIR. RI 4. 1953b, 114, 273.

46 Islaz — commune in Teleorman County, located in the Oltenia region at the confluence of the Olt River and the Danube.

47 Locality in Teleorman County.

48 The Romanian artillery here was commanded by Major Alexandru Fălcoianu, who was supported by the 7th Line Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ioan Grigore, and the 5th Line Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ioan Petrovici.

49 Vintilă P., Vintilă P. jr. 1977, 110.

50 DPIR. RI 4. 1953b, 114.

51 Drăghicescu M. 1943, 193.

52 Popescu N.D. 1889, 61.

The efficiency of the Romanian artillery was praised by General Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin on 29 June 1877, during his visit to the outposts along the Turnu Măgurele line. Thanks to the continuous and precise fire from Romanian batteries directed at Turkish troops stationed north of Nicopolis, the Russian 9th Corps was able to attack the fortress from the south on 3 July 1877, with General Nikolai Krüdner's soldiers succeeding in encircling it. Romanian-Russian cooperation thus ensured the success at Nicopolis, which followed two days of clashes between forces of unequal size, with the attackers outnumbering the defenders three to one. The capitulation took place on July 4, when Hasan Pasha and Ahmet Pasha realised that the fortress was "ablaze, with gunpowder and ammunition depots exploding" and that the officers "no longer had authority over the demoralized troops, who were left without combat ammunition or food."[53]

The establishment of Russian control over the fortress enabled the construction of a second bridge across the river, linking Nicopolis and Turnu Măgurele, a project essential for easing the flow of traffic.[54] The contribution of Romanian artillery to this military success was acknowledged and to mark the occasion, a banquet was held on 5 July 1877, at a restaurant in Turnu Măgurele, during which several Romanian officers were decorated.[55]

Major Moise Groza, a correspondent for Transylvania Gazette, noted that the authorities were striving to maintain a sense of normalcy, attending to the upkeep of parks and organising public concerts every other day to reassure the residents.[56] Nevertheless, the war influenced the rhythm of life in this city; Colonel C.V. Căplescu noted that the town was in a state of "ceaseless agitation", as "Russian and domestic troops swarmed like bees in an apiary; regiments arrived and departed constantly, accompanied by their supply convoys." Moreover, officers had replaced the usual clientele at the town's leisure spots although there were few attractions in this "rather shabby" town which was characterised by "small, low houses, sprawling courtyards and gardens, and many vacant lots." According to Jean Lahovary, the town centre was notable for a "small public garden and a few hotels, the best of which was nothing to write home about", though it still offered more comfort than field barracks.[57]

On 8 July the Russians attacked Pleven, an operation that failed due to insufficient forces committed to the fight, as a portion of the Tsar's troops had remained

53 Văcărescu T.C. 1886, 125–127.

54 Coșbuc G. 1907, 15.

55 The victory at Nicopolis resulted in: 1,000 Turks and 1,200 Russians killed or wounded; 6,000 Turkish prisoners; and the capture of 100 pieces of artillery, 10,000 rifles, and two warships, along with their crews.

56 Vintilă P., Vintilă P. jr. 1977, 132.

57 Râpeanu V. 1977, 81.

at Nicopolis to maintain control over the captured fortress.[58] The Russian failure to capture Pleven fundamentally altered the Russian Empire's perspective regarding Romania's role in the war. While the Romanians were initially expected to provide logistical support and conduct operations from a distance (specifically, from the left bank of the Danube), the situation changed, leading to a request to cross into the Ottoman Empire.[59] Against this backdrop, it is therefore understandable why Prime Minister Ion C. Brătianu and General G. Manu arrived at Turnu Măgurele, the point where the Romanian units preparing to cross the Danube were concentrated.

The mere occupation of the city of Nicopolis offered the Romanians no guarantee that they would place the Russians in their debt or compel them to recognise the state's independence; yet, they had no other alternative, for: "The war is now approaching our borders, and should the Turks emerge victorious, they would descend upon the country en masse, leaving slaughter, plunder and devastation in their wake. To spare the country the cruelty of the invaders, it is our duty to go and fight against them on their own soil."[60] The Romanians therefore "rendered the Russians a great service",[61] while simultaneously ensuring that the war would not spread beyond the territory of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the 4th Division occupied the Russian garrison at Nikopol, thereby releasing between 3,000 and 4,000 of the Tsar's soldiers for the second assault on Pleven on 18 July 1877.[62] Nevertheless, the Russians failed to breach the system of fortifications constructed by Osman Pasha.[63]

On 19/31 July Grand Duke Nicholas requested the support of Romanian troops[64] and agreed that Russian and Romanian soldiers would operate at Pleven under the command of Prince Carol I, assisted by General Zotov.[65] The Romanian army deployed to the Bulgarian front was divided into General Alexandru Cernat's Operational Army (tasked with crossing the Danube and comprising the 3rd and 4th Divisions, as well as the reserve) and General George Lupu's Observation Army (stationed on the left bank of the river opposite the city of Vidin and consisting of the 1st and 2nd Divisions).[66] In response to the Tsar's brother's request, 38,000 Romanian soldiers arrived on Turkish soil, representing 50% of the allied troops at Plevna, a figure that dropped to approximately 30% only in the autumn, following the arrival of Russian army reinforcements.[67]

58 Bourde P. 1878, 1002.
59 Choublier M. 1897, 23.
60 Giurescu C.C. 1939, 257.
61 RRPN 2. 1908, 28.
62 Ciachir N. 1996, 89.
63 Focșeneanu I. 1957, 179.
64 Maiorescu T. 1994, 90.
65 Isar N. 2007, 313.
66 Goubard P. 1920, 14.
67 Adăniloaie N. 1978, 363.

On 20 August the crossing of the Danube began at Turnu Măgurele via a pontoon bridge, under the watchful eye of Carol I, who observed the "ranks of brave, stalwart young men marching spiritedly into the heat of battle",[68] and on 30 August three Romanian divisions participated in the Third Battle of Pleven. During this engagement, the Grivița 1 and Grivița 2 redoubts were attacked but only the first was captured, at the cost of 1,300 casualties (killed and wounded) among Romanian troops and 1,012 among the Russians.[69] Throughout September and October, Romanian forces led by General Alexandru Cernat contributed to the complete encirclement and siege of Plevna (1 September — 28 November 1877), and on 9 November 1877, they captured the fortress of Rahova. As a consequence, the Turks' capacity to counterattack was weakened, as their lines of communication with Sofia and Vidin — sources of potential reinforcements — had been severed.[70] As a result, Pleven capitulated on 28 November an objective achieved with the support of the Romanian army, which demonstrated that its intervention was not merely useful, but indispensable.[71]

In recognition of their service during the operations at Plevna, several soldiers received the Cross of the Danube Crossing and the Defenders of Romania's Independence medal in December 1877; in January 1878, the 13th Infantry Regiment was awarded the Order of the Star of Romania, with Prince Carol I emphasising that "in the face of the enemy, this regiment demonstrated devotion and courage, participating in almost all the attacks launched against the fortifications at Plevna."[72]

Moving accounts describe the soldiers' return home; Turnu Măgurele was one of the towns where residents acclaimed their heroism and welcomed the victorious troops with cheers, flags and a shower of flowers.[73]

It is worth noting that Turnu Măgurele hosted not only military personnel but also Romanian and foreign journalists keen to report from a location that was safe yet close to the conflict zone. Among the contingent were correspondents for the newspapers "L'Estafette" and "Il Diritto", who wrote about the "military valour of the Latin brothers."[74] Furthermore, several painters (Nicolae Grigorescu, Sava Henția, G.D. Mirea, Carol Popp de Szatmary) and writers (Vasile Alecsandri, George Coșbuc) stayed there temporarily, immortalising wartime scenes in their works.

High-ranking Romanian state officials also resided in the town for several weeks, including Prime Minister Ion C. Brătianu, who stayed at the Teleorman County Prefecture

68 Stern A. 1915, 198.

69 Hitchins K. 1996, 59.

70 Focșeneanu I. 1957, 181, 187.

71 Filitti I.C. 1935, 75.

72 Giurescu C.C. 1939, 271, 277–278.

73 SJTAN PTM 7. 1877, 31.

74 "Românul" 3 August 1877, 692.

headquarters while overseeing troop supplies.[75] As previously mentioned, Turnu Măgurele served for several months as the primary link to the front; supplies and war materiel destined for Allied troops passed through the town, traversing a route of approximately 50 kilometres, a journey that grew increasingly difficult with the onset of winter, as "wagons laden with supplies would get lost in the snow, while the oxen and the soldiers driving them perished from the cold."[76] Furthermore, this locality provided the necessary resources for Carol I's headquarters at Poradim; the town supplied not only the furnishings for the Prince's residence but also the builders and painters who constructed the church in Poradim.[77]

The Role of the Town of Turnu Măgurele in Supporting the War Effort

Another aspect of the town's contribution to the war effort was the activity of civilians, coordinated by the requisition commission established in April 1877 by order of the Minister of the Interior. Acting in accordance with the regulations on military requisitions, the Commission had to secure accommodation, food, fodder and means of transport for Tsarist and Romanian troops in transit, as well as for combatants and soldiers stationed in the area. To this end, a consolidated list was compiled of individuals, merchants and property owners who held the goods subject to requisition, ensuring that sources of supply were known in advance should the need arise. Bread ovens and mills were also requisitioned, and the population was encouraged to make donations. The civilians showed genuine empathy, and patriotism triumphed over poverty; documents record their sacrifices and their desire to make life easier for the soldiers. For instance, on 2 June 1877, the 2,450 *ocale*[78] of requisitioned beans were supplemented by another 250 donated by the public; on another occasion, six town residents donated 3,450 *ocale* of beans and 21 kg of oats, while several landowners donated their horses.[79]

The documents highlighted the discrepancy between the authorities' requests and the capacity to meet the troops' needs regarding food, transport and accommodation. One such instance occurred in June 1877, when General Manu, anticipating the arrival of 3,600 soldiers and 600 horses, asked Prefect Gh. Kirițescu to secure the necessary food and fodder supplies; this undertaking entailed establishing a bread and meat depot at Turnu Măgurele, as well as constructing two bread ovens. Due to the

75 Rosetti R. 1928c, 23.

76 Coșbuc G 1899, 37–38, 72.

77 Locality near Pleven.

78 *Oca*, *ocale* — old unit of measurement for capacity and weight, equal to approximately 1.25 litres (or kilograms).

79 SJTAN PTM 675. 1877, 90; SJTAN PTM 3. 1877, 71; SJTAN PTM 5. 1877, 44.

tight deadline and a lack of personnel to undertake the requisitions, the request could not be fulfilled.[80] Correspondence between the authorities reveals the Requisition Commission's efforts to gather the requested supplies and make them available to the army as quickly as possible. These efforts can be exemplified by the following: on 14 June 1877, 70 carts (each drawn by four oxen) and 330 carts (each drawn by two oxen) were requisitioned from the town; meanwhile, by 15 July 1877, the authorities had successfully collected 47,865 kg of hay, 26,630 kg of corn (of which 25,000 kg were donations from residents), 13,977 kg of straw, 41,906 kg of cornmeal, 4,276 bread rations, 185 *oca* of beans and 35 beds with their accompanying tables.[81] Added to this were hundreds of heads of cattle, as well as timber and barley. Quotas for supplies varied throughout the different stages of the war but showed an upward trend as the number of soldiers and prisoners increased. For instance, on 10 August 1877 — as the number of troops quartered in the town rose — the Military Intendance requested 3,000 loaves of bread per day. On 1 December, an order was issued for the urgent requisitioning of one-third of the hay held by the residents of Turnu Măgurele.[82]

It is worth noting that those responsible for logistics did not limit themselves to managing supplies that had been requisitioned or donated by the population of Turnu Măgurele; they also handled the centralisation of resources arriving from other counties. As a result, several depots were established in the town, including one designated for ammunition and weapons.

However, the demands of the war exceeded the population's capacity and there were times, such as in September 1877, when "soldiers lacked both food and clothing."[83]

Such difficult situations were also caused by deteriorating weather conditions and poor infrastructure. As a result, the route to the front became increasingly arduous, leading to longer transport times, vehicle damage and the exhaustion of both draft animals and the carters compelled to ceaselessly transport supplies and the wounded along the Pleven–Turnu Măgurele route.

Economic pressure on the town intensified with the arrival, in several waves, of thousands of Turkish prisoners captured at Nicopolis and Pleven. The town served as a transit point for these troops, and the pressure exerted by the waves of prisoners cannot be ignored. Specifically, during the first half of December, four columns arrived, comprising 4,000, 3,500, 6,562 and 8,162 Turkish soldiers, respectively, along with 183 officers, meaning that over 20,000 men passed through the city en route to Alexandria in the span of just four days.[84] When the thousands of Romanian soldiers escorting the captives are also taken into account, it is therefore unsurprising that

80 DPIR. RI 4. 1953b, 263.

81 SJTAN PTM. 3. 1877, 68.

82 SJTAN PT 4. 1877, 53; SJTAN PT 7. 1877, 27.

83 Vlad R.D. 1987, 1028.

84 DPIR. RI 8. 1954b, 52.

the town's logistical resources were overwhelmed and that prisoners had to be distributed to neighbouring communes.

Accounts regarding the prisoners are numerous and help shed light on their desperate plight. The thousands of captives marched for days on end "barefoot, through frozen snow and biting cold", wearing inadequate gear ("They had no winter clothing... The soldiers were half-naked, in a worse state than beggars"). The prisoner convoys were "images of the most wretched suffering", and many of the Turks, victims of hunger and disease, failed to reach the Danube; they were abandoned on snow-covered fields, where they met their end.[85] Most, however, survived the journey, yet it was only upon arriving in Romanian territory that they received care, as was the case in Turnu Măgurele.

Turnu Măgurele and its Medical Importance during the War of Independence

It is necessary to clarify the medical assistance provided to those involved in the conflict, regardless of nationality, especially given that the town served as the terminus for the lines evacuating the wounded from the front. It is worth noting that during the war of 1877–1878, several buildings were requisitioned and repurposed. This was the case for hotels (such as the Belford, Raymond, Grand Hotel and Zottu), school buildings (including Boys' School No. 1), and private homes (such as the residence of Domnica Marinescu). Certain public spaces, for example the garden of the city, were also used to establish hospitals. Starting on 20 August 1877, a field hospital with four large tents and forty beds operated in the public garden.[86] Through the combined efforts of the Ministry of War, the Red Cross Society, the Ladies' Committee of Iassy and the Independence and Israelite societies, a major medical centre with a capacity of 2,500 beds was established in the town. Its scale prompted a correspondent for the newspaper L'Orient to write an article titled *Turnu Măgurele Is a Hospital!*, in which he noted: "before entering the town, you pass by Red Cross ambulances (...); in the town centre lies the Independence hospital (...) and further on, in the public garden, you encounter tents filled with the wounded (...). Finally, there is the military hospital, surrounded by tents and packed with the wounded. I had almost forgotten about the ambulances of the Israelite Society of Iassy."[87]

Caring for the sick and wounded required the cooperation of qualified medical personnel, the authorities and the local population. Consequently, it is not surprising that pharmacists supplied medicines at a 40% discount,[88] while civilians responded

85 Coșbuc G. 1907, 189, 231.

86 DPIR. RI 6. 1953c, 441.

87 Mardale A. et. al. 1977, 115.

88 DPIR. RI 6. 1953c, 441.

to appeals such as the one published in the newspaper "Românul" (The Romanian): "A contribution, be it money, new or used linen, flannel, socks, handkerchiefs, or anything else, however small, will be of great value and bring a blessing with it."[89] Such messages appeared frequently in the press, signalling that wartime needs were mounting and the Romanian state was unable to meet them fully. As a result, monetary donations were prioritised, and merchants were encouraged to part with, for the benefit of the soldiers, clothing items that were "outdated or stained, and could otherwise only be sold at a significant loss."[90]

Thanks to donors, considerable sums were raised by the end of 1877, with over 110,000 lei directed solely to the Independence Hospice hospital[91] in Turnu Măgurele. Furthermore, demonstrating patriotism and generosity, residents provided beds, bandages, compresses, linens, firewood, food, cigarettes and tobacco, as well as funds for medicines and specialised medical instruments. Subscription lists published in the "Monitorul Oficial" (Official Gazette) or the newspaper Românul recorded daily contributions ranging from 3,000 to 10,000 lei. Even more significant were the donations received directly by the government, totalling 9,247,000 lei, an impressive sum sufficient to "supply our entire field army for over 300 days, that is, for the duration of the war", and equivalent to more than "two-thirds of the budget allocated to the Ministry of War for the year 1877."[92]

Civilians, especially those with medical experience, were encouraged to dedicate themselves to the "cause of the wounded", as doing so meant they could "save the lives of hundreds of human beings."[93] Turnu Măgurele was explicitly mentioned in these appeals as a primary arrival point for soldiers evacuated from the front, who awaited specialised care with "understandable eagerness."[94] Several ladies from high society became involved in hospital operations and the alleviation of the soldiers' suffering, including Maria Rosetti, Maria Bâlcescu, Elena Dumitrescu-Severeanu, Lucreţia Lecca, Elisa Djuvara, Elena Câmpineanu, Natalia Suțu, Elena Cantacuzino, Zoe Sturdza and Eliza Vârnav-Liteanu. Their work involved preparing and serving food, bandaging the wounded, distributing medication, reading correspondence received from relatives and writing letters on behalf of those wounded soldiers unable to write replies to their loved ones themselves.[95]

89 Marinescu B. et. al. 1978, 111.

90 "Românul" 28 September 1877, 863.

91 The hospital was led by Maria Rosetti, who, in recognition of her tireless efforts, was made an honorary member of the Belgian National Red Cross Society. Ioniță E. 1977, 2220–2221.

92 Adăniloaie N. 1967, 446, 452.

93 "Românul" 31 August 1877, 780.

94 "Românul" 1 September 1877, 773.

95 Coșbuc G. 1899, 241–242.

The wartime hospital workload was intense, with operations conducted almost continuously, which accentuated the physical and mental exhaustion of the medical staff and required staff rotations. Consequently, staff were replaced and supplemented by reservists and volunteers, including 15 nuns from the Horezu monastery, who volunteered at the military hospital.[96]

Problems did not bypass the hospitals, especially at the beginning of their operation or when they were faced with an influx of wounded. According to Dr. Ludovic Fialla, on 2 September, when due to poor coordination ("there were a few hours of unforgivable confusion"), the soldiers were initially stored in the public garden and, after more than a day of waiting, took their place in the beds.[97] Furthermore, cases of medical malpractice were reported, such as the application of a concentrated sesquichloride solution to gunshot wounds, causing necrosis, or the application of plaster casts to fresh, complex wounds, thereby intensifying the patient's pain.[98]

In addition, maintaining the necessary level of cleanliness in hospitals "required an enormous effort",[99] while the approach of winter necessitated adequate preparations, including installing stoves, procuring firewood, plastering walls for better insulation and training medical staff to replace broken windows.

These were isolated cases, for in general, "the medical staff demonstrated dedication", working "with great skill and goodwill.[100] Consequently, it is not surprising that positive impressions prevail among the medical staff, and among those who benefited from satisfactory treatment conditions. An account exists of an officer treated in the ambulance tent of the Ladies' Benevolent Society of Iași; he noted the presence of "well-appointed beds with very clean linens" and stated: "We received excellent care from both the doctors and the ladies of the benevolent society, such that neither officers nor soldiers lacked anything."[101] The same source highlights the attention given to the wounded from Pleven, who were visited by civilians and journalists alike, as well as by the Tsar's sons and foreign officers. Romanian authorities also made sure they were not neglected; the county prefect "visited us twice a day", while Ion C. Brătianu "asked each of us individually about our health, whether we were well cared for, or if we needed anything... He spent hours talking with us and recounting various events that had taken place on the battlefield behind us, and these conversations seemed to soothe our suffering."[102]

96 Rosetti R. 1928c, 25.
97 Mardale A. et al. 1977, 116.
98 Râpeanu V. 1977, 183–184.
99 Fialla L. 1892, 58–60.
100 Fialla L. 1892, 82.
101 Dimitrescu M. 1897, 69.
102 Dimitrescu M. 1897, 74–75.

Doctors from abroad, sent by their governments or by philanthropic societies, were also working in the hospitals of Turnu Măgurele. For instance, in September 1877, Dr. Kalinderu, the director of hospital services on the left bank of the Danube, gratefully welcomed five French surgeons (Plateau, Mauvais, Henriet, Miot and Golas), whose "expenses were covered by funds raised through a French subscription campaign organised in Bucharest." At the same time, the arrival of a special mission from the French government, consisting of surgeons Peyrot and Bonilly, was also arranged.[103] They were joined by George McNalty and E.S. Pattison, two surgeons sent by the National Aid Society in London, who began operating at the Independence Hospital in October 1877, bringing with them 77 boxes of medical supplies, medicines, condensed milk, cocoa, chicken and mutton.[104]

All of them contributed to the care of the soldiers, many of whom had gunshot wounds, as McNalty observed on 18 October 1877, while examining some of the 300 combatants. In December, the English physician D.A. Campbell Fraser arrived; he also became involved in delivering supplies from England and organising hospitals in Turnu Măgurele and Bucharest.[105]

Romanian and foreign doctors collaborated, pooling their medical instruments and consulting one another on treatments and procedures; consequently, surgical interventions generally went very well, and hospital services met the necessary standards, though it was noted that "nothing more could have been desired, had it not been for the lack of competent nurses."[106]

Regarding hospital operations in the town, an analysis of reports from the Directorate of Military Hospitals[107] reveals that, between the outbreak of the war and 1 November 7,483 soldiers received care there (5,186 sick or 69%, and 2,297 wounded or 31%). Their distribution among the medical facilities operating in the city was as follows: 6,535 soldiers (87%) in Ministry of War hospitals, 474 (7%) in Red Cross hospitals, 233 (3%) at the Independence Hospital, 101 (1%) at the Iassy Ladies´ Society Hospital, and 140 (3%) at the Israelite Hospital.[108] A graphic representation illustrates the distribution of military personnel across these hospitals, helping to highlight the relative importance of each facility (Chart 1). Information is also available regarding the medical condition at the time of admission for the same period (Table 1).

103 "Românul" 22 September 1877, 843.

104 Hope T.J. 1977, 300.

105 Hope T.J. 1977, 303.

106 "Românul" 22 September 1877, 843.

107 Led by Dr. Iacob Felix.

108 "Românul" 30 November 1877, 1067.

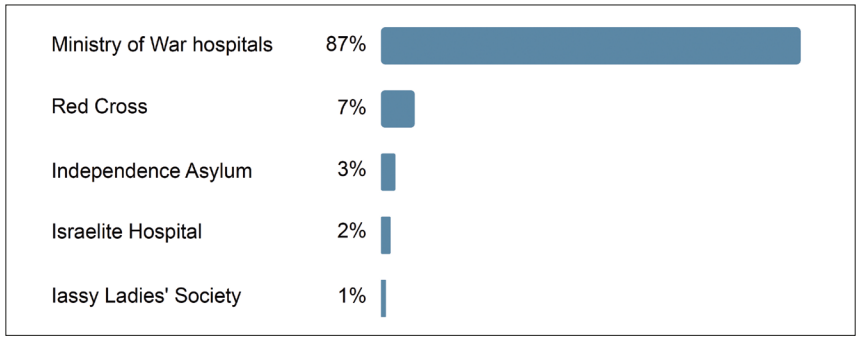

Chart 1. Soldiers treated in Turnu Măgurele from begining of the war until 1 November 1877, by hospitals (Source: Author's own calculations)

Table 1. Distribution of sick and wounded soldiers to the hospitals in Turnu Măgurele up to 1 November 1877 (Source: Author's own calculations)

Name	Sick	Wounded	Total
Ministry of War hospitals	4,918	1,617	6,535 (87%)
Red Cross Hospital	139	335	474 (7%)
Independence Asylum Hospital	47	186	233 (3%)
Iassy Ladies´ Society Hospital	101	0	101 (1%)
Israelite Hospital	82	58	140 (2%)

These data help estimate each hospital's capacity to treat soldiers and provide indications regarding available medical staff, as a larger number of personnel and beds supports a higher patient volume.

Information exists on the soldiers' health outcomes during that period; among those hospitalised at Turnu Măgurele:

- 759 (11%) fully recovered (656 sick and 103 wounded)
- 5,559 (82%) were evacuated to other hospitals while still recovering (3,760 soldiers with minor ailments and 1,799 wounded)
- 167 (2%) were granted leave to complete their recovery (108 sick and 59 wounded)
- 325 (5%) died (Chart 2)[109]

109 "Românul" 30 November 1877, 1067.

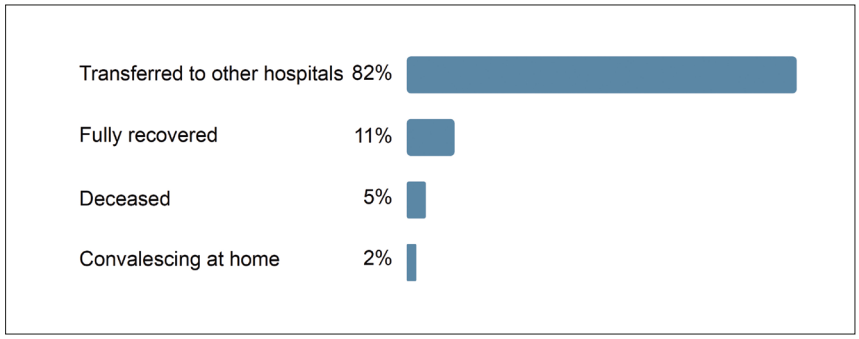

Chart 2. Status of soldiers from Turnu Măgurela according to medical progress up to 1 November 1877 (Source: Author's own calculations)

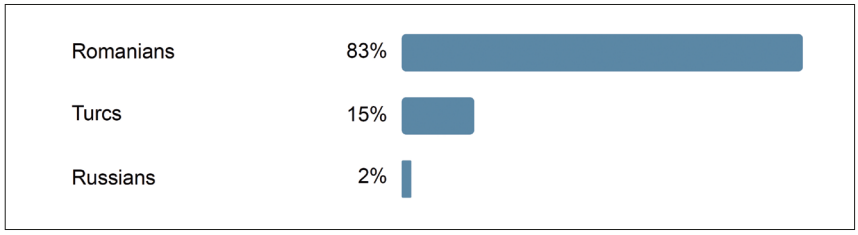

Chart 3. Soldiers hospitalized in in Turnu Măgurele by nationality (Source: Author's own calculations)

Reports from the General Directorate of Hospitals in Turnu Măgurele also reveal that by 15 December 1877, the city's hospitals had treated 10,574 soldiers, comprising 3,502 wounded (33%) and 7,072 sick (67%). Hospital mortality stood at nearly 3%; medical statistics indicate that, in the cases of 467 soldiers, effective intervention to save their lives was not possible.

Also of interest is the information regarding the ethnic background of patients hospitalised in Turnu Măgurele, which shows that medical care was provided regardless of the patients' religion or nationality. Consequently, in addition to the Romanian military personnel, who constituted the majority at 8,815 (83%), treatment was also provided to Turks — 1,602 (15%) and Russians — 209 (2%) (Chart 3).

The available data allow for an even more detailed analysis of the patient cohort, based on both nationality and medical condition. Specifically, of the 3,502 wounded treated in Turnu Măgurele, 2,605 were Romanian (74%), 64 were Russian (2%) and 927 were Turkish prisoners (26%); among the 7,072 sick soldiers, 6,210 were Romanian (88%), 145 were Russian (2%) and 675 were Turkish (10%).[110]

110 "Românul" 22 December 1877, 1135.

The intensification of the war led to a rise in casualties, placing increased strain on medical services; nevertheless, the importance of the hospitals in Turnu Măgurele and their role in treating the wounded and sick cannot be overlooked, given that patients' lives and subsequent recovery often depend on initial medical care. This town paid a heavy price in blood for Romania's state independence: eleven men residing in the town (one sergeant and ten soldiers) lost their lives on the battlefield. They served in the 2nd Artillery Regiment, the 8th Line Regiment, and, notably, the 5th Infantry Regiment.[111]

Conclusions

In conclusion, Turnu Măgurele played a significant role in Romania's war effort, distinguishing itself as a vital logistical hub for the allied armies and, given its location on the Danube, as one of the primary links between the country and the front. It was here that not only the Russian and Romanian armies massed before crossing the river, but also the resources essential for waging the war such as depots for weaponry, food and fodder were established in the town.

Romanian and Russian soldiers marched across the bridge connecting Turnu Măgurele and Nikopol, under the cover of Romanian artillery fire, on their way to the front, and it was via this same route that they returned victorious, greeted warmly by the town's inhabitants. The town also served as a destination for wounded and sick soldiers, as well as Turkish prisoners of war, all of whom received life-saving medical care in hospitals that operated until the spring of 1878.

The dedication of local authorities cannot be ignored, represented by figures such as Prefect Gh. Kirițescu and Mayor Mihail Elefterescu, who made constant efforts to meet the army's needs, whether regarding accommodation, food, or transport, and who ensured suitable conditions for prominent figures (the Tsar and his brother, the Prime Minister of Romania, high-ranking Romanian and foreign officers and cultural and artistic personalities). Likewise, the town's residents joined the authorities and contributed to the cause of independence as donors, transport providers, hospital volunteers and more.

The town's involvement in the 1877–1878 war did not go unnoticed; it was honoured by subsequent generations through the placement of two monuments in Turnu Măgurele, namely: the Infantry Soldier Monument (Fig. 1), created in 1907 by sculptor Raffaello Romanelli, and the Independence Monument (Fig. 2), the work of a group of Romanian artists, dating from 1985. The latter, arranged in a semicircle, offers a synthesis of the event: the statuary group which comprised of a sailor, a border guard and an infantryman, illustrates the three branches of the armed forces involved in the war, while the bas-reliefs depict key moments of the conflict, which were the crossing of the Danube, the Siege of Pleven and the care of wounded soldiers.

111 *Evidența morților*.



Fig. 1. Infantry Soldier Monument in Turnu Măgurele. R. Romanelli, 1907 (Source: Wikipedia)



Fig. 2. Independence Monument in Turnu Măgurele erected in 1985 (Source: Wikipedia)

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faces of war (2026) — 02

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"The Angel of Death of Auschwitz": Dr Josef Mengele in the Memoirs of Prisoners and Shoah Survivors

Summary: The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr Josef Mengele is remembered by former prisoners and Survivors of the Auschwitz concentration camp complex. Mengele's activities in the camp will be presented from the perspective of the victims of the experiments, the doctors who were forced to collaborate, and bystanders. These memories will be analyzed and contrasted with the actual activities of the "Angel of Death" in the prisoner hospital blocks to demonstrate how his myth arose after the war. This article will attempt to demonstrate the factors that influenced the creation of the "Mengele myth," presenting the actual research and experiments he conducted and their grounding in contemporary scientific knowledge and research methodology. The article aims to demonstrate that while many of the stories recounting Mengele's experiments are false, this fact in no way absolves him of guilt for the crimes committed in the camp.
Keywords: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Josef Mengele, medical experiments, testimonies by former prisoners

The Second World War was the bloodiest military conflict in history of humanity to date. Between 1939 and 1945, more than 60 million people — soldiers and civilians, also included those who died from famine and disease — lost their lives as a result of military operations. One of the defining features of this conflict was genocide on an unprecedented scale, directed primarily against the Jewish population. It is estimated

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that six million Jews were murdered as part of this planned campaign of extermination.[1] The sites most closely associated with this crime were the extermination camps established in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe.[2] Physicians played a distinctive role in these killing centers and, as in the case of KL Auschwitz,[3] became symbolic figures of the Shoah. The most notorious among them was SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr Josef Mengele, who, by virtue of the place and time in which he operated, became an archetype not only of Nazi genocidal crime, but of Nazi medicine *per se*.[4]

The aim of this article is to examine how Mengele was perceived by former prisoners and Survivors of the Auschwitz camp complex. These recollections serve as a point of comparison between what was said about Josef Mengele and the research he conducted in the camp, and what can be established on the basis of historical fact. Over time, a number of myths and stories accumulated around this SS physician, many of which bore little resemblance to reality. The reasons for this will be explored in the later part of the article. At the outset, however, it must be stressed that this text does not seek to diminish or discredit the memories of former prisoners and Survivors. Its purpose is rather to show, in accordance with current historical scholarship, what Mengele actually did in the camp and why he should be regarded as a criminal on the basis of his real actions alone.

The principal sources used in the preparation of this article were postwar statements given by former prisoners and Survivors and preserved in the Archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim.[5] Well-known and frequently republished memoirs describing camp imprisonment or encounters with Josef Mengele have been deliberately omitted. This is because such texts are already widely known and relatively easily accessible and have therefore significantly shaped — though not always helpfully — the broader reception of the "Angel of Death."[6] For this reason, I chose instead to rely on shorter written testimonies, many of them far less familiar, yet rich in both valuable information and revealing misconceptions concerning

1 Of the approximately 1.1 million Jews deported to KL Auschwitz, only slightly more than 200,000 were registered in the camp; the rest were murdered in gas chambers immediately upon arrival (in total, about one million Jews perished in Auschwitz). Of the 140,000–150,000 Poles deported to the camp, nearly half — approximately 70,000–75,000 — lost their lives. Of the 23,000 Roma deported there, around 21,000 were killed. Among the 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war sent to Auschwitz, fewer than one hundred survived to see liberation. In addition, approximately 25,000 deportees of other nationalities were imprisoned in the camp, of whom between 10,000 and 15,000 died.

2 For example, in the occupied territories of eastern Poland: Treblinka, Sobibór, and Bełżec.

3 In this article, the terms "Auschwitz" and "KL Auschwitz" refer to the entire camp complex, rather than solely to the main camp, unless otherwise specified.

4 As David G. Marwell aptly observed: "His inflated, sinister reputation as a medical monster is inversely proportional to our actual knowledge of his activities," Marwell D.G. 2020, 95.

5 The Statements collection comprises 168 volumes, while the Memoirs collection consists of 289 volumes.

6 Among the most well-known works are: Langbein H. 2017; Nyiszli M. 2017; Perl G. 2025; Mozes Kor E., Rojany-Buccieri L. 2014.

the subject of this study. Broadly speaking, the witnesses whose recollections are cited here may be divided into three groups: victims of experiments, medical personnel in the prisoners' hospitals, and outside observers.

The first part of the article briefly outlines how the role and competences of physicians were understood in the Third Reich and shows how this affected the position of medical personnel in concentration and extermination camps. It then presents a concise biographical sketch of Josef Mengele, focusing on the facts most relevant to the later sections of the text. The following part discusses the experiments and studies conducted by the "Angel of Death"[7] in KL Auschwitz, especially in Auschwitz II–Birkenau. These are presented in light of the current state of knowledge and placed within the broader context of contemporary medical science. The central section of the article is devoted to an analysis of the recollections of prisoners and Survivors who encountered Mengele in various ways and to varying degrees. These testimonies are subjected to critical factual evaluation, allowing us to determine with some precision which of them reflect the actual activities of the SS physician in the camp and which contributed to the formation of the "Mengele myth" (or indeed emerged from it). The concluding section seeks to explain why this man — who, as the reader will see, was in many respects a "thoroughly ordinary criminal" — became a symbol not only of Auschwitz and Nazi medicine, but also of virtually every conceivable pseudoscientific experiment. How, then, did the "Mengele myth" arise?

As Robert Jay Lifton writes in *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, the biomedical vision of the Third Reich transformed physicians from healers of sick individuals into healers of the nation.[8] This "healing," however, assumed a grotesquely perverse form: it was to be achieved through killing. Murder became a therapeutic imperative. As one physician at KL Auschwitz, Fritz Klein, put it: "The Jews are a festering appendix that must be removed from the body of the patient in order to protect and preserve his life," where the "patient" was the *Volk* itself.[9] The medicalization of murder in Hitler's Germany was legitimized by the participation of physicians. They were not merely obedient executors of orders; they also displayed initiative and were capable of deriving tangible professional and personal benefits from the circumstances in which they found themselves. Concentration and extermination camps became ideal spaces for the enactment of this new role, where killing inmates became routine under the guise of medical care. This "healing" of the nation assumed a fully formalized shape after January 20. 1942 — the infamous

7 There is no clear information as to who first used the phrase "Angel of Death". In journalistic and historical writing, the term first appeared in 1986, as the title of a book by Posner G.L., Ware J. 2014.

8 In the "holistic" conception of medicine in the Third Reich, it was portrayed as a form of biomedical mysticism in which the German people (*Volk*) were regarded as sacred, Lifton R.J. 2024.

9 Fritz Klein made this statement in a conversation with the prisoner-physician Ella Lingens-Reiner, APMAB. Lingens E., *Oświadczenia*. 6, 796.

Wannsee Conference — when the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*) was set in motion.

Department V — the SS Camp Medical Service[10] — was created primarily in order to provide medical care for camp staff. Until 1943, the "treatment" of prisoners in practice largely consisted in detecting infectious diseases so as to prevent epidemics. In reality, this usually meant killing prisoners suspected of being ill. The pretense of providing care to inmates meant that all medical facilities in the camps were makeshift and poorly equipped. At the head of Department V stood the SS garrison physician (*SS Standortarzt*), who was responsible for its operation and also acted as the superior of all SS physicians. Members of the camp medical service played an active role in the extermination process by participating in selections of newly arrived prisoners, selections in the camp hospitals, and the killing of inmates in the course of experiments. Physicians subordinate to the *Standortarzt* were divided into SS troop physicians (*SS-Truppenarzt*) and camp physicians (*SS-Lagerarzt*). The latter were fully responsible for conditions in prisoners' hospitals and also they had the privilege of conducting their own research on camp inmates.[11]

Before Josef Mengele's activities in KL Auschwitz can be discussed, it is necessary to sketch, at least briefly, the childhood and early youth of the future infamous physician. Josef Mengele was born on 16 March 1911 in the Bavarian town of Günzburg. He was the eldest son of Karl and Walburga, née Hupfauer.[12] He had two younger brothers, Karl and Alois, with whom he appears to have spent a relatively carefree childhood. His father owned an agricultural machinery factory, into which he invested virtually all of his resources and savings. The business prospered, and before the outbreak of the First World War Karl employed around thirty workers.[13] Josef's mother was also involved in the management of the factory, which meant that the three brothers were frequently left in the care of nannies and servants. Their parents' hard work, and the rapid expansion of the business that resulted from it, ensured that the young Josef grew up in comfortable circumstances; the family could even afford what, at the time, would have been considered extravagant purchases, such as a car (Fig. 1).[14]

10 Following the model of KL Dachau, each camp was divided into five departments, each responsible for different functions: Department I – Commandant's Office; Department II – Political Department; Department III – Camp Administration, and IIIa – Prisoner Labor; Department IV – Administration; and Department V – Medical Service. There was also a Department VI – SS Welfare and Training, although it did not play as significant a role in the functioning of the camp as the other five.

11 For more on the organization and functioning of Department V, see: Lasik A. 1993, 263–269.

12 A few years earlier, Mrs. Mengele had given birth to a son named Karl; however, the child died after only a few days, Völklein U. 2021, 37.

13 Völklein U. 2021, 44. In 1959, at the time of his death, the "Karl Mengele & Sons" machinery factory was the largest employer in the region, and it was largely thanks to it that Günzburg gained recognition.

14 Völklein U. 2021, 45.



Fig. 1. Josef Mengele with his parents. Germany, 1938 (Source: Yad Vashem, Sign. 1584/365)

Neither the environment in which Josef grew up nor the education he eceived seemed to foreshadow the emergence of the future "Angel of Death." In 1924, he joined the *Grossdeutschland Jugendbund* (Greater Germany Youth League). Among conservative-minded citizens of the Weimar Republic, this was not at all unusual.[15] Mengele rose within the organization and even held leadership positions. In his memoirs, he later recalled the group's activities with pride and nostalgia.[16] Known to family and friends as "Beppo," young Josef was apparently well liked and adept at winning people over. He even wrote plays, which were staged on various occasions in his hometown.[17] After completing his education at the *humanistische Gymnasium* in Günzburg, Mengele went to Munich, intending to study dentistry at Ludwig Maximilian University. Following a conversation with a friend he met there, however, he decided instead to apply for medicine.[18] During his university years in Munich and Bonn, he also studied anthropology and, as was common at the time, philosophy. While still a student, he joined the *Jungstahlhelm* in 1931, leaving it in 1934

15 Although it might appear that Karl Mengele was actively involved in the Nazi Party, this was not entirely the case. The head of the family, a man of conservative views, was at the same time highly pragmatic and used the system to his own advantage. The postwar denazification proceedings concerning Karl Mengele demonstrated that he behaved correctly and fairly toward opponents of the regime and toward Jews, Marwell D.G. 2020, 23.

16 Marwell D.G. 2020, 23.

17 Kubica H. 1993, 327.

18 Marwell D.G. 2020, 25–27.

after its compulsory merger with the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*).[19] In 1935, he defended a dissertation entitled *Rassenmorphologische Untersuchung des vorderen Unterkieferabschnittes bei vier rassischen Gruppen* (*A racial-morphological study of the anterior section of the mandible in four racial groups*). The next stage in his career involved placements in Leipzig and Frankfurt. It was in Frankfurt that he met the man who would have the most profound influence on him and direct his interests toward twin studies: Baron Professor Otmar von Verschuer. Given the role he played, this figure warrants particular attention.

Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer was born on July 16, 1896 in Richelsdorfer Hütte. He became renowned as a distinguished anthropologist and geneticist specializing in twin research, and he achieved considerable recognition in this field. He completed his habilitation in 1927 at the University of Tübingen and became an associate professor in 1933. Baron von Verschuer was also the founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Der Erbarzt*. A major advance in his career came in April 1935, when he was appointed director of the Institute of Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene at the Faculty of Medicine of Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. From 1942 onward, he headed the Institute of Anthropology at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin. It is worth noting that he also served as head of the NSDAP Office of Racial Policy. After the war, he continued his academic career and achieved international recognition; he authored approximately 290 publications on twin studies, anthropology, and genetics. From 1952, he served as president of the German Anthropological Society. He died in a car accident in Münster in 1969.[20] It may be stated with a high probability that it was he who encouraged Josef Mengele to apply for medical service in KL Auschwitz. In this, he saw not only an opportunity for his protégé's advancement, but also significant benefits for himself and for his Institute.

After successfully completing his clinical training and receiving permission to practice medicine, Josef Mengele decided to pursue an academic career. He therefore embarked on a second doctorate, this time in medicine, under the supervision of von Verschuer. In 1938, he defended a dissertation entitled *Sippenuntersuchungen bei Lippen-Kiefer-Gaumenspalte* (*Genealogical studies of cases of cleft lip and palate*), thereby obtaining a doctorate in medical science. In the same year he joined the SS; a year earlier, he had already become a member of the NSDAP. It is difficult today to determine whether this decision was driven primarily by ideological conviction or by cold calculation and pragmatism. It is, of course, entirely possible that in Mengele's case both motives were equally significant.

19 Völklein U. 2021, 71.

20 A highly insightful article on Professor von Verschuer by Weiss S.F. 2012.

The next stage in Josef Mengele's life was military service, which he performed in 1940, after the revocation of his deferment, in the 9th Medical Reserve Battalion (*Sanitäts-Ersatz-Bataillon 9*) stationed in Kassel. There he underwent military training and passed the examination qualifying him as a junior physician.[21] A decision that in some sense brought him closer to KL Auschwitz was his voluntary enlistment in the Waffen-SS.[22] He was first assigned to the Waffen-SS Medical Inspectorate (August–October 1940), then to the Race and Settlement Main Office (November 1940–January 1942), where he was involved in the racial evaluation of *Volksdeutsche* intended for resettlement within the Reich. Finally, in February 1942, he was posted as a medical officer to the SS "Wiking" Division, with which he followed the eastern front campaign route through (Galicia, Ukraine, and Rostov-on-Don) until January 1943.[23] As a soldier, Mengele appears to have shown courage, as he was awarded, among other decorations, the Iron Cross, First and Second Class, and the Black Wound Badge (Fig. 2).[24] After returning to Germany, he reported to the SS Infantry Replacement Battalion "Ost" but he was soon contacted by Professor von Verschuer, who proposed that he establish ties with the Institute of Anthropology at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. As a result, in May 1943 Josef Mengele was transferred to KL Auschwitz, where he began the phase of his career that would earn him the name "Angel of Death."[25]

Many myths and exaggerations have accumulated around Josef Mengele's activities in KL Auschwitz. It is therefore worth establishing what this SS physician actually did in the camp. From the beginning of his stay in Auschwitz II–Birkenau until August 1944, he served as chief physician of the so-called *Zigeunerlager*, the camp for Sinti and Roma in sector BIIe. From the turn of October and November 1944 onward, he was also responsible for the men's hospital in sector BIIf. In addition, as a camp physician, he was responsible for inspecting the hospitals and infirmaries throughout Birkenau. In December 1944, he also served in the SS infirmary. His duties were, as noted above, relatively clearly defined. At the same time, however, owing to the mission assigned to him by the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, he was also able to carry out scientific studies and experiments.

21 Marwell D.G. 2020, 66.

22 In the meantime, Mengele's marital status changed — in July 1939 he married Irene Schönbein. The marriage proved unsuccessful. In March 1944, the couple's only son, Rolf, was born. In the autumn of 1946, Irene filed for divorce (which was granted) and sought to rebuild her life with a new partner.

23 Marwell D.G. 2020, 72–73. In some sources, it is stated that Mengele remained on the Eastern Front until July 1942 and was subsequently transferred to the SS Infantry Reserve Battalion "Ost", see: Klee E. 2014, 438.

24 In addition to documentary evidence, this fact is also confirmed by photographs of Mengele, see: Fig. 2.

25 According to the most recent findings, Mengele arrived at the camp on 17 June 1943, rather than on May 30, Setkiewicz P., Lachendro J. 2024, 1101.



Fig. 2. Josef Mengele was very proud of his military medals. The photo shows the Iron Cross and the Black Wound Badge (Source: Mengele R. 1985)

Within this framework, Josef Mengele's field of activity was clearly delineated. It resulted not only from his personal interests, but also from the tasks entrusted to him by the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute and its director, Professor Otmar von Verschuer. These included:

- research on twins
- *heterochromia iridis*
- Noma
- the physiology and pathology of dwarfism
- congenital anomalies

Research on these topics was financed and supervised by the Berlin institute, and Mengele was expected to provide regular reports on its progress.[26]

Experiments involving twins were not Mengele's own invention, but rather a continuation of research dating back to the nineteenth century. The phenomenon of multiple pregnancy had already been noted by Francis Galton, the cousin of Charles Darwin and one of the founding figures of eugenics.[27] In Germany, the methodology of twin research was developed in 1924 by Hermann Werner Siemens. This method consisted of extremely detailed, multilevel comparative studies of monozygotic and dizygotic twins.[28] As already noted, a major contribution to the advancement of this field was made by Professor Otmar von Verschuer, Josef Mengele's mentor and, from 1942 onward, director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics. It is highly probable that it was he who suggested that Mengele volunteer for service in KL Auschwitz. Von Verschuer was fully aware of the advantages that his institute could derive from having someone with virtually unrestricted access to research subjects and no need to observe the moral or legal constraints ordinarily governing experimentation on human beings.[29] In light of this, the experiments carried out by Josef Mengele in the camp must have proceeded in ways recommended and approved by the Institute. The one crucial difference separating them from von Verschuer's prewar research was the possibility of killing the research subject at any moment, without fear of legal consequences, and then performing a comparative autopsy.

Noma, also known as *cancrum oris*, was a disease known already in antiquity, though it had been almost entirely forgotten in twentieth-century Europe. It tends to occur in conjunction with other debilitating conditions, especially under circumstances of severe malnutrition and extremely poor sanitary conditions. Today, cases still occur in developing countries, above all in parts of Africa and South Asia.[30] When an outbreak

26 Lifton R.J. 2024, 476.

27 See: Galton F. 1875, 566–576.

28 Marwell D.G. 2020, 123–124.

29 In the Third Reich, there was a prohibition against deliberately endangering the life of a German citizen, for example by intentionally infecting them with a disease.

30 For contemporary data on Noma, see: Enwonwu C. 2006.

of Noma developed in the segregated Roma camp in 1943, Josef Mengele decided to exploit the opportunity and familiarize himself with both the disease process and possible methods of treatment. To assist him, he "recruited" — or rather, presented with "an offer they could not refuse" — two Jewish physicians: Professor Berthold Epstein, a world-renowned pediatrician, and Dr Rudolf Vitek (known in the camp as Weiskopf), a specialist in dermatology. After the war, during preparations for the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, Dr Vitek submitted a statement in which he described the circumstances of his forced collaboration with the *Lagerarzt*. He portrayed Mengele as cold and cynical, yet at the same time as a capable and ambitious scientist with extensive medical knowledge. This "collaboration" between the SS doctor and the two Jewish physicians was intended to result in a publication that would help Mengele obtain the habilitation he coveted.[31]

The doctors assigned to work on Noma were not only expected to devise a treatment and draw scientific conclusions, but also to improve conditions in the ward itself — something to which Mengele agreed only after repeated persuasion. Professor Epstein administered a mixture of sulfonamides and niacin, gave patients vitamins, and secured for them a special high-calorie diet. His efforts began to produce results, and in some cases even led to a regression of the disease. Tragically, however, none of the patients — whether children or adults — survived. The experiments involving Noma treatment came to an end in June 1944, when the hospital in the so-called *Zigeunerlager* was liquidated. The Roma camp itself was dissolved in early August 1944, and its prisoners were sent to the gas chambers.[32] Josef Mengele ordered the heads of children suffering from Noma to be preserved in jars of formalin. These were sent to the SS Hygiene Institute in Rajsko for histopathological examination, and some specimens were later passed on to the SS medical academy in Graz.[33]

In addition to conducting his own research, Josef Mengele also undertook a form of commissioned work on behalf of his superior and colleagues at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. For Dr Karin Magnussen, he procured the eyeballs of persons with *heterochromia iridis*. Since differently colored irises were at that time regarded as a pathological condition, research was being conducted into this genetic trait. In the camp, Mengele ordered that children's eyes be treated with substances including adrenaline in an attempt to alter their color. These experiments, however, were not intended to produce perfectly "Aryan" blue eyes, but rather to standardize the coloring of the iris; Magnussen used similar methods in experiments on rabbits. Although the inheritance of eye color was still being studied in the 1940s, knowledge in the field was nevertheless sufficiently advanced for physicians and anthropologists to understand that artificially changing an individual's iris color would have no hereditary consequences for that

31 APMAB. Strafsache gegen Mulka u. a., Vitek R. 59, 11009–11010.

32 Marwell D.G. 2020, 120; Szymański T. 1962, 70.

33 APMAB. Höss Trial. Češpivy J. Testimony. 28, 33–34; APMAB. Dokumenty Instytutu Higieny Waffen-SS i Policji. 41, 69.

person's offspring.[34] Thus, as with the twin experiments, these studies of the eyes did not reflect the pseudoscientific whim of an ignorant researcher, but rather fit within the accepted scientific assumptions of the period. It is worth noting that Magnussen received shipments from KL Auschwitz containing prepared eyeballs selected for her research.[35]

Another of Josef Mengele's interests — one from which other research institutions in the Third Reich also benefited — was congenital anatomical abnormality and the physiology and pathology of dwarfism. Among the thousands of people arriving in Birkenau, he identified "specimens" of interest, had them measured and examined, and then ordered them to be killed. This was followed by post-mortem examination. The bodies were then prepared, and the bones sent, among other places, to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute.[36] In mid-May 1944, the Ovitz family arrived in KL Auschwitz from Hungary. It consisted of ten people, seven of whom were of short stature. Unsurprisingly, Josef Mengele took a keen interest in this family of performers and their unusual physiognomy. Paradoxically, this very "protection" on the part of the "Angel of Death" enabled them to survive and live to see the end of Nazi rule.[37]

Medical experiments, as well as selections in prisoners' hospitals and on the arrival ramp, became among the most recognizable features of Josef Mengele in the statements of former prisoners and Survivors. His interest in twins appears in virtually every recollection concerning him. He is described as standing on the Birkenau ramp surrounded by children and looking for new research subjects.[38] Statements have survived both from victims of his experiments and from people who assisted in them. Testimonies given many years later by children subjected to these studies are not always precise; different events often blur into one another. It is hardly surprising that neither the children themselves nor the mothers who sometimes accompanied them — women without medical training — were capable of describing in scientific terms what had taken place in his office.[39] This gave rise to camp rumors

34 Marwell D.G. 2020, 136–143.

35 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Puzyna M. 167, 74–75.

36 The preparation of human remains of interest from a medical or anthropological perspective was not an invention of physicians working in extermination camps. The only — albeit fundamental — difference was that, for example, 19th century doctors and anthropologists typically waited for the natural death of their subjects. In some cases, this practice took on rather curious forms. See the account of Dr John Hunter and Charles O'Brien in: Belofsky N. 2021, 173–174.

37 For more on the Ovitz family, see: Koren Y., Negev E. 2015, 256.

38 See: APMAB. Oświadczenia. Chomicz A. 82, 6.

39 A particularly sober and credible account of the research conducted by Josef Mengele is provided by one of his victims, Agnes Havas: "For a period of one month we stayed in the infirmary, and during that time we did nothing. We were only examined by doctors, most often by Dr Mengele. Blood was taken from us and we were weighed. Prisoner clerks — Polish and Slovak women — conducted interviews with us about previous illnesses and the like. We stayed in a room where there were only twins of different nationalities. Once we were taken to the camp in Auschwitz to be photographed. I remember that we were also examined in the men's hospital in BIIf". Naturally, as a young person (born 21 August 1927) without medical training, Agnes was not in a position to determine the purpose for which all this information was being collected. APMAB. Oświadczenia. Havas A. 88, 189.

claiming, for example, that Mengele sewed children together,[40] drew blood from them to be sent to the front or simply discarded It(em),[41] or transplanted animal bones into human beings and transfused them with animal blood.[42] Anna Palarczyk offered an account characteristic of the classic "Mengele myth," in which she described the supposed purpose of his twin experiments. Like many others who addressed this subject, she claimed that the SS physician wished to uncover the secret of multiple pregnancy so that every German woman might bear more children at once. He allegedly intended to pair twins and have them reproduce.[43]

Far more concrete information about the twin experiments can be obtained from those who observed Josef Mengele's work on a daily basis or who themselves had medical or scientific training. Particularly credible in this respect is the anthropologist Martyna Puzyna, who before the war had been an assistant to Professor Jan Czekanowski at Jan Kazimierz University in Lwów.[44] Because of her involvement in the Polish Underground State, she was arrested in March 1943 and in August of that year deported to KL Auschwitz. She was sent to Birkenau, where she was assigned to hard physical labor. During a stay in the prisoners' hospital, she came to Mengele's attention, and he decided to "employ" her as an assistant. According to Puzyna, his principal interest lay in comparative research on twins.[45] She was instructed how to take measurements, what to record in the relevant forms, and was provided with the necessary tools. On the basis of her observations, she came to the following conclusion: "Also in the case of Dr Mengele's work, I must admit that, from the point of view of anthropology, the results were unquestionably of considerable value. I realized this already at the time and tried to make use of this knowledge for my own purposes."[46]

40 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Alexander V. 167, 60.

41 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Kagan R. 10, 58. The blood was probably also collected at the request of von Verschuer's institute for research on so-called specific proteins; Klee E. 2014, 439–440.

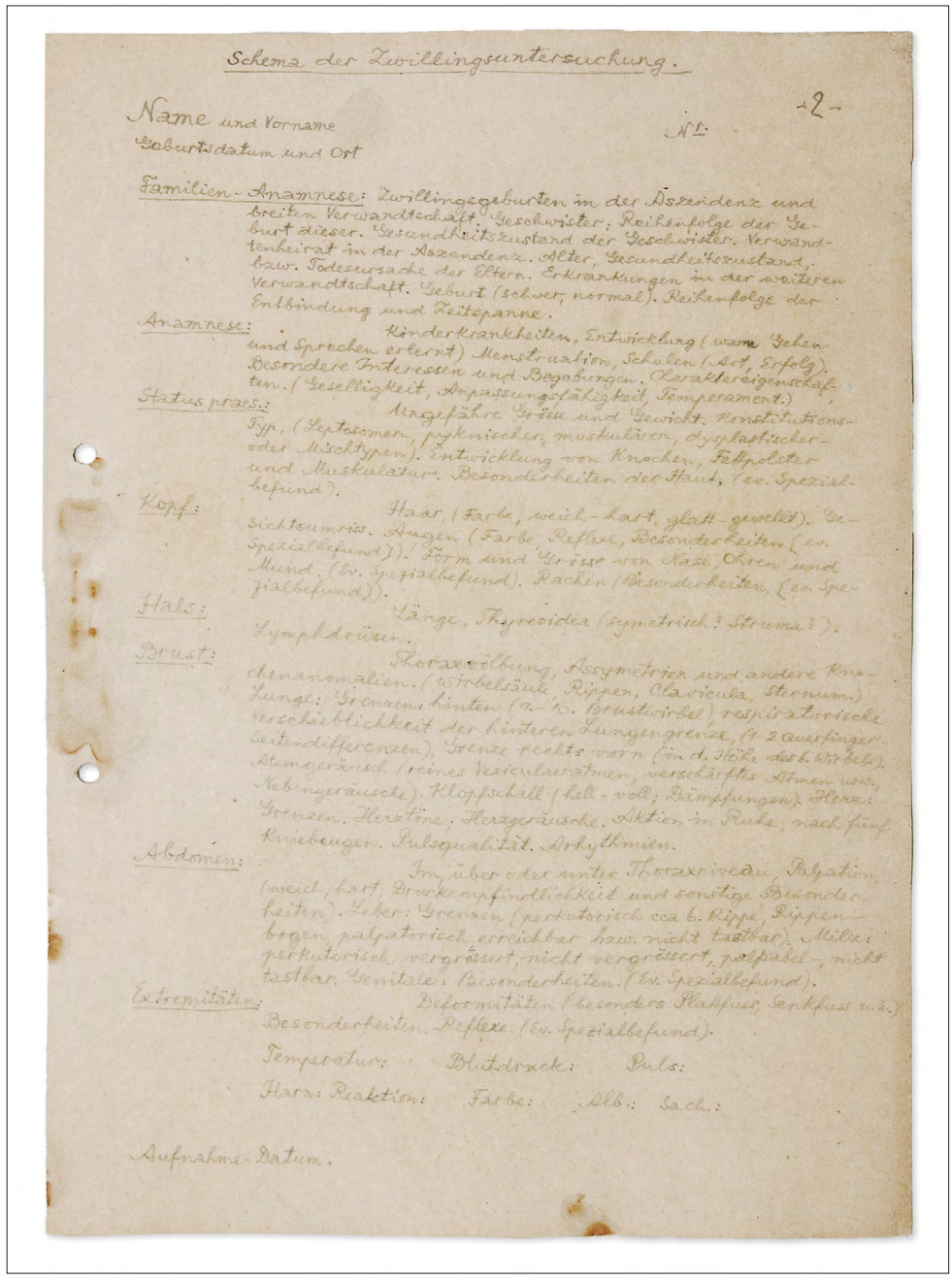
42 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Bratko J. 10, 1.

43 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Palarczyk A. 141, 155–157.

44 Jan Czekanowski — born on 6 October 1882 in Głuchów — was a distinguished Polish anthropologist and ethnographer. From 1934 to 1936, he served as Rector of the Jan Kazimierz University in Lwów. Between 1937 and 1946, he conducted research on the dynamics of population development and demographic losses in Poland. After the war, he headed the Department of Anthropology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. From 1961 to 1964, he served as President of the Polish Ethnological Society. He died in Szczecin on 20 July 1965.

45 M. Puzyna stated: "I would like to point out that this area of knowledge, within the field of established anthropology, constitutes a very important subject of research, particularly from the perspective of theories of heredity. Under no circumstances can it be said that research on twins was an invention of the Nazis. Within anthropology, twin studies have always played an important role". APMAB. Oświadczenia. Puzyna M. 167, 73.

46 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Puzyna M. 167, 75. Halina Czarnocka stated: "We agreed that she should accept this position [as Josef Mengele's assistant – AK] and advised her that, while carrying out research and measurements for the Germans, she should try to make duplicate copies of the results and preserve them for Polish science, preferably by burying them in the ground in metal boxes or bottles". APMAB. Czarnocka H. Memoires. 200, 86.



Schema der Zwillingsuntersuchung.

-2-

Name und Vorname
Geburtsdatum und Ort

Nr.

Familien-Anamnese: Zwillingsgeburten in der Descendenz und breiten Verwandtschaft. Geschwister: Reihenfolge der Geburt dieser. Gesundheitszustand der Geschwister. Verwandtenheirat in der Ascendenz. Alter, Gesundheitszustand, bzw. Todesursache der Eltern. Erkrankungen in der weiteren Verwandtschaft. Geburt (schwer, normal). Reihenfolge der Entbindung und Zeitespanne.

Anamnese: Kinderkrankheiten, Entwicklung (wann Gehen und Sprechen erlernt) Menstruation, Schulen (Art, Erfolg). Besondere Interessen und Begabungen. Charaktereigenschaften. (Geselligkeit, Anpassungsfähigkeit, Temperament.)

Status praes.: Ungefähre Grösse und Gewicht. Konstitutionstyp, (Leptosomen, pykniecher, muskulären, dysplastischer- oder Mischtypen). Entwicklung von Knochen, Fettpolster und Muskulatur. Besonderheiten der Haut, (ev. Spezialbefund).

Kopf: Haar, (Farbe, weich-hart, glatt-gewellt). Gesichtsumriss. Augen (Farbe, Reflexe, Besonderheiten (ev. Spezialbefund)). Form und Grösse von Nase, Ohren und Mund. (Ev. Spezialbefund). Rachen (Besonderheiten, (ev. Spezialbefund)).

Hals: Länge, Thyreoidea (symetrisch? Struma?). Lymphdrüsen.

Brust: Thoraxwölbung, Assymetrien und andere Knochenanomalien. (Wirbelsäule, Rippen, Clavicula, Sternum.) Lunge: Grenzen: hinten (v.-l. Brustwirbel) respiratorische Verschieblichkeit der hinteren Lungengrenze, (+ 2 Querfinger Seitendifferenzen). Grenze rechts vorn (in d. Höhe des 6. Wirbels). Atemgeräusch (reines Vesiculäratmen, verschärftes Atmen usw., Nebengeräusche). Klopfschall (hell-voll; Dämpfungen). Herz: Grenzen. Herztöne, Herzgeräusche. Aktion in Ruhe, nach fünf Kniebeugen. Pulsqualität. Arrhythmien.

Abdomen: Im über oder unter Thoraxniveau, Palpation (weich, hart, Druckempfindlichkeit und sonstige Besonderheiten). Leber: Grenzen (perkutorisch cca 6. Rippe, Rippenbogen, palpatorisch erreichbar bzw. nicht tastbar). Milz: perkutorisch, vergrössert, nicht vergrössert, palpabel-, nicht tastbar. Genitale: Besonderheiten. (Ev. Spezialbefund).

Extremitäten: Deformitäten (besonders Plattfuss, Senkfuss u.ä.) Besonderheiten. Reflexe. (Ev. Spezialbefund).

Temperatur: Blutdruck: Puls:

Harn: Reaktion: Farbe: Alb.: Sach.:

Aufnahme-Datum.

Fig. 3. Guidelines for Twin Examination and Measurement (Source: APMAB, Schematy badań lekarskich, Sign. D-AuII-5/2, inv. no. 154381)

Dina Babbitt (known in the camp as Gottliebova), although neither a physician nor a research subject, had intense daily contact with Josef Mengele. Born in Brno, she was deported to the Auschwitz camp complex in 1943 because of her Jewish origin. In Birkenau, while staying in the children's barrack, she decorated the walls with Disney characters, which attracted the attention of the SS physician Dr Lucas. Knowing that Mengele was looking for someone to paint portraits of Roma prisoners, Lucas informed him about her artistic skills. Because the *Lagerarzt* disliked color photography — believing that it did not faithfully reproduce color — he employed Dina to paint watercolor portraits of individuals he selected. Her task was to render as accurately as possible the skin tones and distinctive facial features of the "models" brought to her by the doctor. Babbitt suspected, probably correctly, that her paintings were intended to serve as illustrations in some future scientific publication by Mengele. Toward her he behaved correctly, though always with his characteristic reserve.[47]

The second indispensable element of the "Mengele myth" is the selection of prisoners — both those newly arrived at the camp and those already confined in the camp hospitals. Many former prisoners and Survivors recalled the physician's casual, almost nonchalant behavior on the ramp. According to witnesses, with a mere movement of his thumb he indicated who was to die immediately and who would be granted the chance of somewhat longer survival.[48] Isabella Maria Sosnowska summarized the impression made on prisoner-observers in the following words: "I remember very clearly how the following doctors repeatedly carried out such selections: Dr König, Dr Mengele, and Dr Rhode (...). For example, Dr König and Dr Mengele performed these selections in a cold manner. One could almost say that participating in them gave them pleasure."[49] Moreover, Josef Mengele was one of the few physicians — indeed one of the few SS men involved in the reception of transports — who did not fortify himself with alcohol before beginning the selection of newly arrived prisoners. According to many Survivors, the SS officer who selected their transport was Mengele himself. This was almost certainly not possible, given that camp physicians worked in shifts; substitutions did occur, of course, but it is physically impossible that every transport arriving at the camp was personally examined by him. The tendency to identify every doctor on the ramp with Josef Mengele had several causes. First, no SS man introduced himself to prisoners. As Survivors' testimonies make clear, the selections proceeded very quickly, offering almost no opportunity to observe the physician closely. Second, after the war the SS doctor became infamous, and his presence in one's recollections added an additional layer of horror. At the same time, it increased the perceived significance

47 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Babbitt D. 77, 139–140. See also: Ostałowska L. 2020, 248.

48 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Jockel E. 18, 66.

49 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Sosnowska I.M. 12, 74.

of such testimony, since its author had encountered *that* criminal — the man who eventually came to symbolize Nazi medical crimes as a whole.

For many prisoners, inspections of the camp hospitals inspired even greater terror than the selections of new arrivals. SS physicians regularly reviewed the sick and decided who should be immediately killed because their condition offered no prospect of a prompt recovery — and thus no prospect of returning to work. These hospital selections, known among prisoners as "pickings for the gas," were also an immense psychological burden for prisoner-doctors. It happened that SS physicians ordered prisoner medical staff to identify the weakest inmates and prepare lists of those to be sent to their deaths. Even in the appalling conditions of the camp wards, this forced triage posed a profound moral challenge. Numerous former prisoners and Survivors described the course of such selections. Ellen Zimmermann recalled that Josef Mengele appeared regularly in the hospital block and demanded that patient charts and temperature records be brought to him. On that basis, he decided who would live and who would die. The selected women — the testimony in question concerned women specifically — were sent to Block 25 in Birkenau, the so-called "death block".[50] After several days without food or water, they were transported by truck to the crematorium. Zofia Mine, by contrast, recalled how she managed to beg Mengele not to send her to her death: "I pleaded with him to spare my life, and I was sent back to the block."[51] This was such an exceptional occurrence that it merits citation here.



Fig. 4. Mengele on the ramp, during the selection of new arrivals (Source: Yad Vashem, Auschwitz Album, Archival Signature: 268/22)

50 APMAB. Strafsache gegen Mulka u. a., Zimmermann E. 8, 1215.

51 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Mine Z. 21, 65.

The killing of prisoners also served Josef Mengele as a method of controlling epidemics in the camp. At the end of 1943, a typhus epidemic broke out in the women's camp at Birkenau. On his orders, six hundred women were sent to the gas chamber, thus clearing the entire barrack. It was immediately emptied and disinfected. The surviving women were likewise disinfected and issued new clothing, after which the remaining blocks were treated in the same manner. The epidemic was indeed brought under control, but at the cost of several hundred Jewish women's lives.[52]

Among prisoners, Josef Mengele had the reputation of being a cold and cynical man. This judgement is borne out by numerous Survivors' recollections. Jiři Steiner,[53] who arrived in the camp together with his twin brother, described his own experience. Initially, the boys were placed in the so-called *Familienlager* (family camp), where until March 1944 they remained with the rest of their family. Following a selection, Jiři's parents were murdered in the gas chamber, and the boys then came to Mengele's attention. One day, the SS physician asked them whether they had any wishes. The boys replied that they wanted to see their parents again, not knowing that their parents were already dead. Mengele responded by telling them that they would see them in a few days.[54]

Mengele's cynicism and peculiar sense of humor are also noted by Alfred Milek.[55] After undergoing the usual reception procedures upon arrival in the camp, the prisoners from the transport that included the Czech doctor were assembled in front of a barrack in sector BIIb. Among the SS men present was the "Angel of Death," who ordered all doctors to step forward from the crowd. He then asked them about their specializations. When Alfred's turn came, he replied that he was a *Hygieniker*. Mengele responded that in that case he would be responsible for hygiene in the camp section to which he had been assigned — that is, for cleaning the latrines and the streets.[56]

The most reliable assessments of Josef Mengele character and his attitude toward prisoners come, however, from prisoner-doctors — both men and women — who had daily contact with him and were often compelled to work with him. One such witness was Dr Ella Lingens,[57] who encountered him in the women's hospital at Birkenau.

52 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Lingens E. 6, 797.

53 Jiři Steiner — born on 20 May 1929 in Prague — was deported to KL Auschwitz from the Terezín (Theresienstadt) ghetto on 8 September 1943 and assigned prisoner number 147743. After the war, he worked as a journalist.

54 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Steiner J. 71, 234.

55 Alfred Milek — Doctor of Medical Sciences; born on 10 April 1899 in Černá Voda (now in the Czech Republic). A prisoner of Auschwitz II–Birkenau, he was assigned number 146712 and deported on 8 September 1943 from the Terezín (Theresienstadt) ghetto.

56 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Milek A. 80, 224.

57 Ella Lingens — Doctor of Medical Sciences; born on 18 November 1908 in Vienna. During the war, together with her husband Kurt and Baron Karl von Motesiczky, she was involved in aiding the Jewish population. For this activity, she was arrested by the Gestapo and, in February 1943, deported to KL Auschwitz, where she was assigned prisoner number 36088. In the camp, she worked in various wards of the prisoners' hospitals, which enabled her to become acquainted with several SS physicians and their approach to patients. She was later honored by Yad Vashem with the title of Righteous Among the Nations.

Based on her observations, she portrayed him as a cold cynic who decided the fate of prisoners with a movement of his thumb. She recalled how he used the hospital staff to carry out selections among the sick in such a way that doctors and nurses were unable to determine how to save even a small number of inmates from being sent to their deaths. Lingens remembered that when a prisoner-doctor judged a female inmate likely to recover, this could provoke sharp criticism from the SS physician: "What? You want to send such a skeleton back to work in three weeks? What kind of doctor are you?" he would say. In this way, no diagnosis seemed acceptable, and any assessment could expose the physician making it to danger. After one of her conversations with him, the Austrian doctor concluded: "Throughout that conversation, I did not have the impression that his antisemitism was a matter of conviction; rather, it seemed to me pure, cynical opportunism." The "Angel of Death" behaved in a similarly cold and cynical manner toward non-Jewish prisoners as well.[58] At this point, Jerzy Tabeau's assessment is worth quoting: "He was an individual whose behavior stood out in comparison with other SS men. This applied particularly in relation to prisoners performing various functions. He was self-controlled and outwardly cultured, yet this did not prevent him from calmly carrying out the most criminal intentions."[59] As these former prisoners' testimonies suggest, the image of Josef Mengele that emerges is relatively consistent: cynical, cold, and at the same time deeply committed to the work he was doing.

Mengele's attitude toward children — the principal subjects of his research — was somewhat different. On his orders, something resembling a *kindergarten* was established in sector BIIe, the so-called *Zigeunerlager*.[60] As Tadeusz Joachimowski recalled: "The *Kindergarten* was organized [in blocks 29 and 31 — A.K.] on the orders of *Lagerarzt* Mengele. The purpose of this order was to relieve parents of the burden of caring for their children so that they could be put to work."[61] It presumably also served to maintain control and facilitate access to research subjects. Many prisoners who observed these interactions remembered his behavior toward children. For example, Ludwika Wierzbicka, who worked in the infirmary of the children's ward in sector BIIe, noted that "toward the children in whom he was currently interested, Mengele was gentle and even gave them sweets. They trusted him and called him 'uncle'. In the final stage of the research, these children were most often killed."[62]

58 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Lingens E. 6, 796–798.

59 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Tabeau J. 98, 10.

60 The camp for Roma families was liquidated in early August 1944. Josef Mengele actively participated in this event and, according to the testimony of Aron Bejlin, allegedly summarized it with the following words: "It is a pity about the romanticism of the Gypsy camp." APMAB. Strafsache gegen Mulka u. a. Bejlin A. 71, 13369.

61 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Joachimowski T. 13, 64.

62 APMAB. Oświadczenia. Wierzbicka L. 87, 92. Regarding Mengele and his attitude toward prisoners under his authority in the so-called *Zigeunerlager*, the following opinions also appear:

One striking feature of Josef Mengele in the recollections of prisoners and Survivors is his apparent omnipresence. Every selection and every medical experiment in the camp seems, in retrospect, to have involved him. According to some accounts, he was already speaking to prisoners, directing them to the gas chambers, or selecting them for his research even before June 1943 — that is, before he had actually joined the camp medical Staff![63] For obvious reasons, such statements cannot be accepted as historical fact. They should not, however, be dismissed altogether. The event itself — a selection, a conversation — may well have taken place, only with another physician as the principal actor. After the war, for a variety of reasons, former prisoners and Survivors identified this anonymous SS doctor with the infamous *Lagerarzt*. Nor can one entirely rule out the possibility that Mengele was present during experiments conducted by other camp physicians. It may be that, invited by his colleagues, he observed their work out of professional curiosity.[64]

Josef Mengele left KL Auschwitz in mid-January 1945. From 17 January he served as a physician in KL Gross-Rosen.[65] After being released from American captivity — which he had entered while disguised in a Wehrmacht uniform — he went into hiding. In 1949, he fled to Argentina. In South America, he lived a relatively quiet life and even maintained contact with his family in Europe. In 1959, as public interest in Nazi criminals living in the Southern Hemisphere intensified, he moved to Paraguay. After Adolf Eichmann was captured by the Mossad, Mengele realized that he might be next. In order to continue evading justice, he fled — with the help of friends — to the last country in which he would remain in hiding: Brazil. Before his death, he managed to meet his son Rolf, to whom he attempted to justify his conduct, although he expressed no remorse whatsoever. Josef Mengele, the "Angel of Death" of Auschwitz, died on 7 February 1979 in the coastal town of Bertioga. The probable cause of death was a stroke

"Dr Mengele was very much liked by us, as he was particularly devoted to helping the Gypsies. He took special care of the children, ensuring above all that they ate regularly and sufficiently. After he arrived at the Gypsy camp, conditions improved immediately. In this context, I would also like to mention that, on his orders, we were once again allowed to grow our hair. I often witnessed Dr Mengele intervening when a Gypsy was about to be flogged. He also ensured that we were able to engage in sports, such as football. I never saw him on the ramp conducting selections of Jewish transports." APMAB. Strafsache gegen Mulka u. a., Strauß A. 17, 2750.

63 See: APMAB. Oświadczenia. Laskowska H. 7, 1007; Oświadczenia. Woźnica A. 86, 107.

64 Excerpt from an evaluation of Josef Mengele written by his superior, SS-Standortarzt Dr Eduard Wirths: "He applied his skills both practically and theoretically in the course of his duties at KL Auschwitz as a camp physician in combating dangerous epidemics. With understanding, perseverance, and energy, he fulfilled all tasks assigned to him — often under extremely difficult conditions — to the fullest satisfaction of his superiors, proving himself to be a man capable of meeting any situation. Moreover, as an anthropologist, he made exceptionally diligent use of the limited free time available to him after duty hours for further study, and in his work, by evaluating the scientific material accessible to him through his responsibilities, he made a significant contribution to anthropological knowledge. His achievements should therefore be regarded as outstanding". APMAB. Beurteilung des SS-Hauptsturmführers (R) Dr. Josef Mengele; Inne Zespoły, IZ-29/5, no. 172864.

65 Last time he was seen in Gross-Rosen in April 1945 in subcamp Görlitz, Sula D. 2022, 25–26.

suffered while swimming in the sea. The exhumation carried out in 1985 confirmed that the man buried there was indeed Josef Mengele.[66]

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, Dr Josef Mengele was one of several SS physicians serving at KL Auschwitz who remained particularly vivid in the memory of Survivors and former prisoners. He became, in effect, a symbol of Nazi medicine and of the medical experiments performed on camp inmates. How he was remembered depended above all on the degree and intensity of the interaction between Mengele and the person recalling him. It is clear that many of the doctors whom he forced to work in his "team" regarded him as ambitious, capable, and possessed of the qualities of a good researcher. At the same time, however, they emphasized his cynicism and ruthlessness, not only toward his prisoner-assistants but also toward the subjects of his experiments. Those who had been subjected to experiments as small children, as well as outside observers, frequently and unwittingly contributed to the making of the "Mengele myth" by spreading exaggerated and sometimes wholly implausible stories about him. Since SS physicians in KL Auschwitz did not introduce themselves to prisoners, many actions committed by other doctors were, after the war, attributed to Mengele as the most famous among them. Thus, as stressed throughout this article, he came to appear in postwar recollection not merely as a participant, but as the principal figure behind the experiments and selections carried out in the camp. The postwar activities of "Nazi hunters," such as Simon Wiesenthal and Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, also contributed significantly to the consolidation of the "Mengele myth." Their efforts cannot be condemned, for at a time when the "Angel of Death" was hiding in South America and the machinery of justice — German as well as Allied — was proving ineffective, sustaining public interest in war crimes more than a decade after the war required immense determination. Unfortunately, such efforts, combined with occasionally implausible testimonies, ensured Dr Josef Mengele a notoriety he did not, in this form, deserve.[67]

As David Marwell rightly observed, the "Angel of Death" of Auschwitz was not a madman indulging in pseudoscientific fantasies. His connections with the Institute of Anthropology at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute both guaranteed and required competence, as well as strict adherence to the scientific assumptions current at the time. As the protégé of one of the most distinguished professors of his era, Mengele was given an opportunity to join the scientific vanguard and make a genuine contribution to contemporary research. His studies were fully consistent with those pursued

66 See: Posner G.L., Ware J. 2014.

67 In the arrest warrant and indictment issued in Frankfurt am Main on 19 January 1981 by the Regional Court (*Landgericht*), 22nd Criminal Chamber, the following statement appears: "The court established that research on twins constituted the principal element of the defendant's pseudoscientific activity. These studies were of particular value to the Nazi regime, especially with regard to the desired increase in birth rates through the genetic enhancement of the proportion of twin births". Quoted after: Posner G.L., Ware J. 2014, 53.

by the scientific establishment of the period.[68] The problem with Josef Mengele's activities and experiments in KL Auschwitz does not lie in the fact that they were irrational or pseudoscientific. What should profoundly disturb the scholarly community — and humanity as a whole — is that a young and talented physician was capable not only of betraying the Hippocratic Oath, but of abandoning all moral restraint in the pursuit of scientific ambition. That he was a criminal is beyond dispute, and this follows from the moral principles — or rather the absence of them — that guided his research. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the fame he still enjoys derives far more from the myths that grew up around him than from the actual nature of his activity or the real significance of his work for the Third Reich.[69]

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68 Marwell D.G. 2020, 152–153.

69 For example, the experiments conducted at Dachau were far more significant for the German war effort in the 1940s.

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faces of war (2026) — 02

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The Instrumentalisation of Historical Memory of Victory Day by the Putin Regime as One of the Sources of Legitimisation of the War against Ukraine

Summary: The article analyses the evolution and instrumentalisation of Victory Day within Russian memory culture as a tool of political and ideological legitimisation of Vladimir Putin's regime. It traces the transformation of the holiday from a grassroots commemoration of World War II veterans into a central myth of the Russian state's historical policy. The study outlines key stages of this process — from the institutionalisation of the holiday in 1965 and its revival under Boris Yeltsin, to its conversion in the twenty-first century into a cornerstone of the Kremlin's memory politics. The analysis examines the militarisation and sacralisation of commemorations, the cult of symbols (the St. George's ribbon, the Immortal Regiment, the letter Z), and the integration of the narrative of Ukraine's "denazification" into the legacy of the Great Patriotic War. The author argues that through these mechanisms, Victory Day has lost its commemorative function and evolved into a myth of abstract Victory, serving to justify Russia's aggression against Ukraine and to reinforce the revisionist model of historical policy.

Keywords: Victory Day, memory politics, historical revisionism, Putinism, Russia

Introduction

Victory Day constituted an important component of Soviet historical memory and has remained an important element in the Russian Federation. However, in Putin's Russia it has become not only an element of historical memory, but also an instrument of the

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policy of the Russian authorities aimed at legitimising the Russian regime and its foreign and domestic policies particularly after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This article examines the instrumentalisation of Victory Day, focusing on the growing narrative that its instrumentalised form alone constitutes authentic respect for Second World War participants because it supposedly preserves the continuity of the holiday's original commemorative practices. Is Victory Day during Vladimir Putin's presidency actually a faithful continuation of the Soviet tradition? This article traces the evolution of the holiday in order to answer the question: how, as a result of its instrumentalisation, did Victory Day become one of the sources legitimising the anti-Ukrainian narrative?

Origins and Institutionalisation of Victory Day in the USSR

Victory Day became the most important holiday in contemporary Russia,[1] but in the first years after the end of the Second World War it did not have such status or social reception. Although it became a state holiday and a non-working day as early as 1945, in 1947 it lost its status as a non-working day in favour of New Year's Day.[2] Despite losing this status, Victory Day remained an important holiday for many citizens of the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1965, who celebrated it with their families or by participating in events organised by local authorities.[3]

The widespread grassroots celebration of Victory Day in the individual republics of the Soviet Union[4] contradicts the narrative present in Vladimir Putin's rhetoric following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which presents only citizens of the Russian Federation as the rightful heirs to the Soviet Union's victory over the Third Reich, thereby excluding citizens of the other states that once formed part of the Soviet Union, particularly Ukraine.[5] This narrative denies the individual experience of millions of Ukrainians who, during the Second World War, were Soviet citizens and contributed to the victory over the Third Reich as members of the Red Army,[6] while also revising the history of the development of Victory Day commemorations by equating the USSR with Russia. This narrative acquires particular importance in the context of the instrumentalisation of Victory Day within the anti-Ukrainian narrative of Putin's Russia,

1 *Rossiyane.* 2025.

2 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 64.

3 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 78.

4 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 64.

5 This is manifested in Vladimir Putin's emphasis on the contribution of the Russian SFSR to the victory over the Third Reich while simultaneously marginalising the contribution of the other Soviet republics. Source: *Putin.* 2010; *Vstrecha.* 2025.

6 As P.J. Potichnyi reports, approximately 4.5 million Ukrainians served in the Red Army in 1941–1945. Of these, 409,668 received the Medal For Courage, and 961 were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Source: Potichnyi P.J. 1986, 61.

especially since, as the Canadian historian Roman Serbyn rightly observed, "Ironically, Ukraine seems to have played a central role in the revival of what eventually became the main Soviet holiday."[7] The crucial role of Ukraine in the revival of state Victory Day commemorations consisted in the fact that in 1964 Petro Shelest, then First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, requested that the Central Committee of the CPSU organise state Victory Day commemorations in 1965, arguing that this would respond to public demand, since, as he wrote, the inhabitants of the Ukrainian SSR were creating new "rituals and customs" from below to commemorate Victory Day and the memory of participants in the Second World War.[8]

As a result of Petro Shelest's initiative, in 1965 Victory Day once again became a non-working day.[9] In the same year, the first military parade on Red Square in Moscow was organised to mark Victory Day.[10] This marked the beginning of the Brezhnev model of institutionalising Victory Day commemorations, which also included the construction of numerous monumental memorials[11] and support for cinematography devoted to the Second World War and expressing the state's official narrative.[12] Despite its numerous manifestations, the Brezhnev-era model of Victory Day commemorations, although it strengthened the cult of the Great Patriotic War, did not reach the scale characteristic of Putin's memory politics. This was because many veterans were still alive during the Era of Stagnation, and consequently strong grassroots, family-based historical memory continued to exist. The dual nature of Victory Day in the Brezhnev era was well captured by the American historian Nina Tumarkin, who wrote that Victory Day during the Era of Stagnation "was both the tool of propagandists touting its triumphs and a memorial day for milions of relatives and friends of the war dead."[13]

Re-instrumentalisation of Victory Day in the Russian Federation, 1995–2014

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a decline in the importance of Victory Day. During Boris Yeltsin's first presidential term, Victory Day was perceived in Russia as a holiday belonging to the previous era.[14] In order to emphasise the break with the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin stopped cultivating many Soviet traditions, including state

7 Serbyn R. 2007, 116.

8 Quoted after: Serbyn R. 2007, 116.

9 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 74–75.

10 Malinova O. 2017, 50.

11 Tumarkin N. 1994, 143.

12 One of the most important examples is the film Liberation (*Освобождение*), directed by Yuri Ozerov and made for the 25th anniversary of Victory Day. Source: Youngblood D.J. 2006, 158.

13 Tumarkin N. 1994, 37.

14 Malinova O. 2017, 48.

Victory Day commemorations.[15] During these years, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which opposed President Boris Yeltsin, organised its own Victory Day commemorations.[16] The situation changed in 1995, when Boris Yeltsin organised the first Victory Parade in the history of post-Soviet Russia on Red Square in Moscow. The 1995 Victory Parade included a march by Second World War veterans.[17] Their participation was a manifestation both continuation of the Soviet tradition and of grassroots historical memory centred on direct participants in historical events. The aesthetics of the Parade were to a significant degree Soviet, as demonstrated, among other things, by the decoration of Red Square with images of the Soviet Order of Victory, by the fact that the parade was received for the last time in its history by a Marshal of the USSR,[18] and by the continuation of the tradition whereby the head of state received the parade from the tribune of Lenin's Mausoleum. In his speech, Boris Yeltsin emphasised the victory of the Soviet Union as a state and as a union of all the individual republics, rather than emphasising the role of Russia.[19] Such extensive recourse to Soviet symbolism by Boris Yeltsin, who had avoided it in previous years, was connected not with the fact that 1995 marked the 50th anniversary of Victory Day, but with the presidential campaign then underway. By organising commemorations in a form referring to the Soviet tradition, Boris Yeltsin intended to gain the support of a segment of the electorate nostalgic for the Soviet Union and therefore inclined to vote for Yeltsin's most important opponent in the 1996 presidential election — the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Gennady Zyuganov.[20]

The 1995 Victory Day commemorations constituted a turning point in the instrumentalisation of Victory Day due to the combination of elements of the Soviet form of commemoration with a new model, emerging from that year, which subsequently became the Yeltsin–Putin model. The Yeltsin Victory Parades of 1996–1999 constituted a reproductive continuation of the model of organising ceremonies developed in 1995, characterised by Boris Yeltsin's extensive use of Soviet symbols in the context of Victory Day. However, an evolution limiting Soviet symbolism to some extent is noticeable. This was expressed in Yeltsin's abandoning, from 1997 onwards, the practice of receiving the Victory Parade from the balcony of the Mausoleum,[21] as well as in the gradual increase in references to Russia rather than the USSR in presidential speeches.[22]

15 Malinova O. 2017, 48.

16 Malinova O. 2017, 51.

17 Malinova O. 2017, 51–52.

18 The Marshal of the USSR who received the Victory Parade in 1995 was Viktor Kulikov, *Post·sovetskiye parady. Ch. 1.* 2013.

19 *Parad Pobedy 9 maya 1995*.

20 Zygar' M. 2021, 247–249.

21 *Post·sovet·skiye parady. Ch. 1.* 2013.

22 Malinova O. 2017, 55.

The greatest change in the 2000 Victory Parade was the person of the President of Russia himself, since that year the Parade was received for the first time by the new president, Vladimir Putin. The commemorations emphasised this change through the presence of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin alongside one another; thus, the 2000 Victory Parade additionally legitimised Vladimir Putin as Boris Yeltsin's successor. In terms of symbolism, no significant changes occurred in 2000 compared with 1996–1999, apart from the continued evolution of the narrative towards emphasising Russianness.

The Beginnings of the Anti-Ukrainian Instrumentalisation of Victory Day

The instrumentalisation of Victory Day commemorations in Russia began to increase markedly after 2005 as part of a broader reaction by the authorities to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004). Both this event and the earlier Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) were described in Russian political discourse as colour revolutions.[23] The authorities of the Russian Federation interpreted them not as the result of internal social processes, but as attempts to destabilise the region inspired by Western states.[24]

In this context, efforts in Russia to consolidate society around the state intensified through the creation and subsequent strengthening of the so-called Russian idea.[25] One manifestation of this was the concept of sovereign democracy promoted by Vladislav Surkov, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration.[26] In parallel with this process, the campaign to distribute the St. George's ribbon, initiated in 2005, became an element of memory politics.[27] The symbol, originating from the Order of St. George established by Catherine II in 1769,[28] began to acquire new meaning and increasing popularity.[29] Gradually, the St. George's ribbon was transformed into a key element of the state cult of Victory,[30] which served to strengthen the new model of commemoration and the historical policy associated with it. Over time, the significance of the ribbon began to extend beyond the sphere of memory of the Second World War. In public and political discourse, it began to be presented as an emblem of loyalty to the concept of the so-called Russian world (*русский мир*) — an idea

23 Laruelle M. 2025, 236.

24 Laruelle M. 2025, 236.

25 Suslov M. 2024, 96.

26 Surkov V. 2006.

27 Weiss-Wendt A. 2022, 93.

28 Kolstø P. 2016, 668.

29 Kolstø P. 2016, 672.

30 The culmination of this process occurred on 29 December 2022, when the St. George's ribbon was granted the status of a symbol of Russian military glory. Source: *Federal'nyy zakon ot 29.12.2022 No 579-FZ*.

of a cultural-civilisational community encompassing all peoples who speak Russian and recognise Russia's spiritual heritage.[31]

The form of the Victory Parade underwent another significant evolution after 2004. In 2005 an air component was introduced into the Parade,[32] and for the first time the decoration of the Victory Parade was designed so as to conceal Lenin's Mausoleum, which until 2004 had been one of the central visual points of military parades on Red Square. In 2004, these decorations took the form of a series of state flags of the Russian Federation positioned in front of the Mausoleum, while from 2005 onwards the Mausoleum has been covered every 9 May by a special structure.[33] The structures concealing the Mausoleum are decorated mainly with Russian symbolism (the colours of the Russian state flag, the St. George's ribbon, official logos of individual round anniversaries), or with neutral imagery (photographs from the Second World War and the words Victory Day).[34] Soviet symbolism is rare on these structures and is represented mainly by images of Soviet orders.

The Conservative Turn and the Sacralisation of Memory (2012–2022)

The beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term in 2012 marked the beginning of the so-called conservative turn, consisting in a radicalisation of the ideology of Putinism.[35] This radicalisation manifested itself in placing greater emphasis on shaping historical memory within the concept of a unified, uninterrupted, thousand-year history of Russia (*единая, неразрывная тысячелетняя история*), according to which Kyivan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation, regardless of their different political systems, were supposedly one and the same Russia.[36] Traditional values were another concept introduced in 2012.[37] These ideas became crucial for the historical policy of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term and supported by Vladimir Medinsky, the main populariser of the concept of historical policy as an instrument of Russian politics and Minister of Culture in 2012–2020.[38] He also contributed to strengthening the instrumentalisation of Victory Day and its use in the anti-Ukrainian narrative

31 Laruelle M. 2025, 237.
32 *Post·sovet·skiye parady*. Ch. 3. 2013.
33 *Post·sovet·skiye parady*. Ch. 3. 2013.
34 *Post·sovet·skiye parady*. Ch. 3. 2013.
35 Laruelle M. 2025, 61–63.
36 *Poslaniye Prezidenta*. 2012.
37 *Poslaniye Prezidenta*. 2012.
38 Laruelle M. 2025, 64.

with the help of state-supported cinematography,[39] which contributed to an increase in nostalgia for the USSR.[40]

The annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas caused another breakthrough in the development of the use of instrumentalised Russian memory politics towards Ukraine. A narrative emerged portraying supporters of Euromaidan as "Nazis" or "Banderitas."[41] One consequence of this narrative was the adoption of an amendment to the Russian Criminal Code adding Article 354.1, which penalises the rehabilitation of Nazism.[42] Its purpose was to emphasise that Russia was taking action against the ideology of Nazism, while the Ukrainian authorities supposedly tolerated or even supported it. This narrative was also used by pro-Russian separatists. They referred to the Tsarist concept of Novorossiya[43] and selectively to some Soviet symbols, such as Soviet city names and the red banner, while simultaneously re-ideologizing them and instrumentalising Putin's concept of the "Russian world."[44] For this reason, the separatists cultivated the Putinist form of Victory Day commemorations and made the St. George's ribbon one of the symbols of the struggle against Ukraine.[45]

In Russia, the annexation of Crimea produced the effect known as the Crimean Spring[46] — that is, a significant increase in support for Vladimir Putin and in nationalism and militarism in Russian society as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea.[47] This translated into both a rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiments[48] and an increase in public support for the state version of Victory Day commemorations.[49] As a result of the Crimean Spring effect and the intensification of historical policy, the state model of historical memory began in the 2010s to become increasingly important. This is demonstrated by the absorption of the largest grassroots initiative associated with family historical memory — the Immortal Regiment movement. The Immortal Regiment was initiated in 2012 by journalists from Tomsk.[50] The idea of marches carrying portraits of ancestors who had participated in the Second World War was transformed

39 Wijermars M. 2019, 221.

40 Werner W. 2019, 205–220.

41 Laruelle M. 2025, 93.

42 *Federal'nyy zakon ot 05.05.2014 No 128-FZ.*

43 Laruelle M. 2025, 242–243.

44 Bækken H. 2025, 28–52.

45 Haskins E. 2021, 208.

46 The name of the annexation of Crimea used by the Russian media and authorities. *Khronika anneksii*. 2019.

47 Laruelle M. 2025, 63–64.

48 Laruelle M. 2025, 63–64.

49 This is evidenced by the increase in support for the view that the most appropriate form of Victory Day commemorations is military parades and other official events — from 28% of respondents in 2010 and 29% in 2015 to 35% of respondents in 2018. Source: *Den' Pobedy*. 2018.

50 Haskins E. 2022, 194–195.

into an element of official memory and a demonstration of loyalty to the authorities when the process of the Russian state taking control of the movement was completed in 2015.[51] The symbol of the Russian authorities' assumption of control over what had previously been a grassroots initiative was Vladimir Putin's participation in the 2015 Moscow Immortal Regiment march, in which he carried a photograph of his father, a Second World War veteran.[52] After 2015, the Russian authorities used the Immortal Regiment movement as a tool of legitimising power, presenting its mass attendance and growing popularity as evidence of widespread support for the state historical memory canon.[53]

In the 2010s, the development of the state cult of Victory Day encompassed additional institutions, including the Russian Orthodox Church. A symbolic expression of this was the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, erected in 2018–2020 to mark the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War.[54] Its architecture and interior sacralise the cult of Victory Day. The height and number of the Cathedral's domes reflect key dates of the Great Patriotic War.[55] The mosaics reflect the ideas of a unified and uninterrupted history of Russia. One is devoted to the annexation of Crimea.[56] The mosaic legitimises and heroizes the act of annexation by depicting Russian soldiers standing before a crowd of Crimean residents carrying banners reading "Crimea is ours" and "Forever with Russia". The mosaic suggests that the annexation took place by the will of God in response to the piety of the inhabitants of Crimea, since the crowd carries an icon of the Mother of God and her figure rises above it. The mosaic is framed by the St. George's ribbon, which additionally emphasises the connection between the cult of Victory Day and the legitimisation of anti-Ukrainian policy.[57]

The Radicalisation of the Anti-Ukrainian Instrumentalisation of Victory Day as a Result of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022

The instrumentalisation of Victory Day to legitimise Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was employed from the very beginning of the invasion. In his first speech on 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin identified "the denazification of Ukraine" as one of the main goals of the war.[58] In all his Victory Day speeches in 2022–2025, Vladimir Putin

51 Haskins E. 2022, 197–198.

52 Fedor J. et al. (eds), 2017, 313.

53 Fedor J. et al. (eds), 2017, 325–326.

54 *Glavnyiy Hram*.

55 *Glavnyiy Hram*.

56 *Chem zamenili mozaiku*. 2020.

57 *Chem zamenili mozaiku*. 2020.

58 *Obrashcheniye*. 2022.

linked the events of the Second World War with the so-called special military operation, SMO (*специальная военная операция*, *СВО*),[59] through the thesis of historical continuity between the generations of Second World War participants and Russian soldiers. In every speech he consistently linked the Second World War with the so-called SMO, presenting it as a continuation of the struggle against Nazism and proof of the historical continuity of generations.[60] This narrative, based on the myth of defending the truth about the Great Patriotic War, served to justify aggression and to reinforce Russians' identity as the descendants of the victors.[61] Identifying victory in the Second World War with the Russian-Ukrainian war is not merely an element of Vladimir Putin's Victory Day rhetoric, but part of a broader process of transforming the meaning of the holiday. Victory Day, once dedicated to commemorating people who directly experienced the war, has been transformed into a cult of abstract victory — a myth gradually losing its historical reference to 1945 and becoming an "eternal" feature of Russian identity. Pro-Putin writer Aleksandr Prokhanov put it as follows: "The Victory of 1945 goes beyond the calendar; it ceases to be a calendar date. Russian Victory has always existed; it is eternal."[62]

Although the intensification of this process occurred after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its manifestations had appeared previously. They included works linking memories of the Second World War with current politics, including Oleg Gazmanov's song "Forward, Russia!" (*Вперёд, Россия!*),[63] composed for the 70th anniversary of the victory, and "Donbas Is Behind Us" (*Донбасс за нами*) from 2020.[64] Both songs were performed on 18 March 2022 during the For a World Without Nazism concert at Luzhniki Stadium,[65] aimed at showing the unity of society around Vladimir Putin.[66] The event, organised less than a month after the beginning of the invasion, directly linked the rhetoric of the fight against Nazism with the cult of Victory Day. The concert stage was filled with a new symbol of Putinism — the letter Z,[67] originally a marking on Russian military vehicles, which during the first weeks of the war was transformed into a symbol of the so-called Z-patriotism movement.[68]

The concert of 18 March 2022 was only one of many events organised by the Russian authorities in order to promote the idea of abstract victory and legitimise the

59 *Obrashcheniye*. 2022.

60 *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi.* 2022; *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi.* 2023; *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi.* 2024; *Parad v chest' 80-letiya Velikoy Pobedy.* 2025.

61 *Parad v chest' 80-letiya Velikoy Pobedy.* 2025.

62 Prokhanov A. 2025.

63 *Oleg Gazmanov*. 2025.

64 *Narodnyy gimn.* 2024.

65 *Kontsert v Luzhnikakh*. 2024.

66 Garner I. 2023, 21–22.

67 Garner I. 2023, 21–22.

68 Laruelle M. 2025, 36–37.

invasion of Ukraine. This narrative was consistently present during Victory Day commemorations in 2022–2025. The Immortal Regiment was particularly important because, owing to its scale and established tradition, it became a key vehicle for this idea. The organisers of the marches allowed participants to carry portraits not only of Second World War veterans, but also of soldiers killed during Russia's aggression against Ukraine, thereby symbolically equating them.[69] This form of equation also appears in Russian schools as part of the Hero's Desk (*Парта героя*) programme, under which school desks are decorated with photographs and biographies of participants in the Second World War[70] as well as participants in the so-called SMO.[71]

The Hero's Desk campaign was one of the new tools of Russian historical policy used to promote the cult of Victory Day within the educational system. Similar functions were performed by other initiatives, including the Guardians of History[72] (*Хранители Истории*) and Victory Dictation[73] (*Диктант Победы*) projects, as well as the international school olympiad Great Victory (*Великая Победа*), organised to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the war.[74] The state's historical-policy objectives were also implemented through the compulsory school subject introduced in 2022, Conversations about Important Things[75] (*Разговоры о важном*). The most important instrument of educational legitimisation, however, became a new series of history textbooks. The first volume, prepared by former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky and Anatoly Torkunov, Rector of MGIMO, was published in 2023 as a textbook for Grade 11. It covers the period from 1945 to the present, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, presented as a heroic struggle of the descendants of victors against Nazism and the so-called collective West.[76] In this way, the textbook reinforces a revisionist vision of Russian history in the spirit of the idea of a thousand years of state continuity and legitimises aggression against Ukraine by employing a narrative derived from the Putinist cult of Victory Day.

Conclusion

Victory Day during Vladimir Putin's presidency does not constitute a faithful continuation of the Soviet tradition of commemorating this holiday because, although it retains part of the Soviet form of commemoration, it changes its function and meaning

69 *V aktsiyu.* 2022.
70 *Parta geroya.* 2022.
71 *Geroi.* 2025.
72 *Hraniteli istorii.*
73 *Diktant pobiedy*.
74 *Ob olimpiade*.
75 *Minprosveshcheniya*. 2022.
76 Medinskiy V., Torkunov A. 2023, 390–411.

from a day of remembrance of victory in the Second World War into an instrument legitimising Russian power and aggression against Ukraine. This process developed gradually — from the appropriation of grassroots memory rituals through their militarisation and sacralisation to the consolidation of the cult of symbols such as the St. George's ribbon, the Immortal Regiment and the symbol Z. The transformation rests on the institutional monopolisation of historical memory through the production of a state canon by means of revisionist historical policy, standardisation of the educational curriculum, subordination of grassroots mass forms of commemoration, religious sacralisation and the re-ideologisation of the symbolism of Victory Day.

This model of memory serves to consolidate society around a revisionist vision of history, strengthens memory wars in the international sphere and also serves as an instrument legitimising Russia's war against Ukraine. It does not focus on commemorating the victims of the Second World War, but instrumentalises their memory, creating a myth of abstract victory that normalises militarism and perpetuates a revisionist, instrumental model of historical memory.

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Beyond Fukuyama's End of History: Globalisation Regress, Expectations, Norm Erosion, and the Re-legitimation of War

Summary: This article analyses post-Cold War expectations of stability by distinguishing between Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis and the progression of globalisation. While both contributed to assumptions of declining conflict, they failed to ensure a stable international order. Looking through *Collective Action Theory*, the study explains how cumulative shocks, economic crises, security threats, and institutional erosion, globally impacted levels of social tolerance. This chain of events normalised outcomes once seen as unlikely, including democratic backsliding, reduced civil liberties, and the growing acceptance of force worldwide. These developments are analysed as interconnected manifestations of changing collective expectations, rather than isolated trends. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is considered a sociological watershed, consolidating the hitherto dynamics. The article argues that contemporary instability does not mirror the failure of liberal democracy as a model, but the weakening of social conditions that previously made it more promising.
Keywords: End of History, Globalisation, *Collective Action Theory*, Norm Erosion, Democratic Backsliding

Introduction

The end of the Cold War signified an unprecedented change in the international system and created new expectations for the future of global politics. In the early 1990s, the collapse of bipolar rivalry was seen not only as a geopolitical change but as the beginning of a new stage determined by the easing of ideological conflicts, growing cooperation, and the consolidation of liberal democracy.

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One of the main interpretations of the concept was Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. His thesis stated that liberal democracy represented the very final stage of ideological evolution, and, consequently, the outbreak of large-scale armed conflicts would remain unlikely. Instead of making predictions, it offered a diagnosis for conditions in which convergence would gradually replace confrontation.[1]

At the same time, the 1990s saw rapid globalisation, a multidimensional process of economic integration, political cooperation, technological interconnection, and intensified cross-border interaction. It reflected a structural transformation, rather than a single policy or ideology. Progress in communication and transport technology reduced spatial barriers and increased interdependence, raising expectations of stability, prosperity, and cooperation, alongside the diffusion of governance and market norms.

Although often discussed together, Fukuyama›s thesis and globalisation should be treated as distinct starting points. The former expressed a normative expectation about political development, while the latter led to material and institutional change. Both occurred in the same period and made assumptions about a decreasing likelihood of conflict, yet neither explained the potential aftermath, nor did their coexistence ensure a stable order.

It is worth considering this gap through Mancur Olson›s Collective Action Theory, which explains how individual preferences affect collective outcomes, shaped by incentives, thresholds, coordination problems, and social norms.[2] It applies not only to how these outcomes arise, but also why they persist, even when they prove unfavourable.

In the post-Cold War context, this framework helps explain responses to uncertainty, economic disruption, and political stress. As institutional trust weakens and reference points destabilise, tolerance thresholds shift, altering what is seen as acceptable or legitimate. Outcomes once viewed as unlikely, such as sustained conflict, restrictions on freedoms, or democratic backsliding, may become normalised through adaptation, rather than explicit support. Importantly, these developments do not occur in isolation. The increasing acceptance of constraints on civil liberties, erosion of democratic safeguards, and growing willingness to tolerate coercion, including both external conflict and more force-oriented forms of domestic governance, can be understood as interconnected manifestations of a broader shift in collective expectations. This approach highlights how structural pressures interact with social perception to produce non-linear political trajectories. The article integrates these strands into a coherent framework.

Three decades after the end of the Cold War, global politics diverges from early expectations. Confidence has eroded, and conflict has become more visible and thinkable as a tool of statecraft. At the same time, changes in governance and social tolerance

1 Fukuyama F. 1992, 211–286.

2 Olson M. 1965, 5–42.

suggest that this shift extends beyond the external sphere, affecting how authority, constraint, and the use of force are perceived more generally. This shift reflects not a simple return to past patterns, but a change in how conflict is perceived and integrated into decision-making.

Global interconnectedness persists, yet expectations of liberal convergence, cooperation, and restraint have weakened as cumulative crises make coercion increasingly conceivable, despite the persistence of norms restricting its use. This uneven transformation of collective expectations can be understood as the emergence of a "post-post-Cold War" condition. The concept captures the weakening of assumptions associated with the preceding order, without implying its complete disappearance or a universally applicable date of transition.

This raises a key question: why did post-Cold War optimism and expanding interconnectedness fail to prevent renewed instability? The answer lies not only in weakened globalisation or institutions, but in how societies interpret and respond to change. Structural conditions shape options, but outcomes depend on collective perception and acceptance. Expectations of peace and prosperity do not ensure stability. Instead, they are mediated by attitudes towards risk, legitimacy, and uncertainty.

Existing literature often treats these dimensions separately. Structural accounts, such as Mearsheimer[3] or Friedman,[4] emphasise power and integration, while others, including Rodrik[5] or Levitsky and Ziblatt,[6] focus on political and societal responses. Fewer studies examine how normative expectations, structural change, and collective interpretation interact over time.[7] Even influential works on international order tend to prioritise institutions or ideology over perception.[8]

This article complements existing research by integrating insights from international relations, political economy, and sociology. Its objectives are threefold: to clarify the relationship between post-Cold War expectations and globalisation, to show how sociological mechanisms mediate structural change, and finally, to illustrate how shifts in perception contribute to renewed conflict. In so doing, it treats developments in security, governance, and civil liberties not as separate trajectories, but as interconnected outcomes shaped by common underlying dynamics.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, theory-guided approach, selecting modern conflicts and crises for their relevance to changing expectations of security, cooperation and restraint, and their consequences beyond the immediate conflict zone. Historical examples are necessary to connect the theoretical argument with

3 Mearsheimer J.J. 2001.

4 Friedman T.L. 2005.

5 Rodrik D. 2011.

6 Levitsky S., Ziblatt D. 2018.

7 Ikenberry G.J. 2001.

8 Mearsheimer J.J. 2018.

concrete circumstances in which collective expectations of stability, cooperation and force are challenged. Therefore, the article offers an interpretive account of selected historical events related to the conflict-prone nature of international relations. Selection is purposive, guided by the international prominence of the events' and their significance for public debate and perceptions beyond the societies directly affected, rather than by a systematic ranking of crises. The examples encompass economic disruption, particularly the global financial crisis; military intervention and prolonged insecurity in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen; migration-related political tensions in Europe; the rise of populism in democratic countries; and challenges to territorial restraint, most prominently Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Theese distinctions organise the discussion, yet the central concern is the interdependence of perceptions generated by these events. Declining confidence in economic security or institutional competence may shape how subsequent political and military threats are interpreted. Thus, the cases illustrate how expectations shaped in one context can influence responses in another, without assuming uniform reactions across societies.

The aim is not to present a deterministic account, but to emphasise contingency and the role of social interpretation. The article explains how optimism and interconnectedness could coexist with, and give way to, instability without reducing this outcome to a single cause.

Historical Preconditions of Post-War Pacifism and Post-Cold War Optimism

The twentieth century saw unprecedented violence. The world wars extended destruction beyond battlefields to civilians, economies and societies, fundamentally altering perceptions of war. It came to be viewed less as a tool of statecraft and more as an existential threat. This shift emerged across societies affected by industrialised warfare.

After the wars, broad aversion to large-scale conflict developed. Although rivalry persisted, public tolerance declined. Governments could no longer treat war as routine, as its political, economic and social costs became decisive. The memory of mass casualties and collapse fostered pacifist attitudes that increasingly shaped political decision-making, not only through direct public pressure, but also by altering the wider expectations within which political actors operated across different regime types.[9]

This transformation was uneven. Many regions experienced decolonisation conflicts, proxy wars and external interventions. In developing or newly independent states, conflict persisted, shaped by Cold War dynamics and weak institutions. The key difference lay not in attitudes, but in institutional capacity to constrain

9 Porter B.D. 1994.

decision-makers. Where accountability and representation were weak, public preferences had limited influence. Conflict endured not through support, but through structural conditions and governance restraints that limited the translation of societal attitudes into policy outcomes.

Nevertheless, these attitudes had political effects. Even amid rivalry, authorities recognised that legitimacy required commitment to peace. Preventing another systemic collapse became central not only ethically, but for political survival, whether through direct electoral accountability, elite consensus, or the need to maintain social stability. Even though the competition continued, the period saw growing efforts to institutionalise cooperation and limit the risks of power politics.

Global Integration

Within this context, global integration can be understood, not as an abstract ideology, but as a historically grounded answer to the failures of previous international orders. Cooperation increasingly adopted structured political, economic, social, and cultural forms, creating a set of interconnected processes collectively described as globalisation.[10]

Globalisation was neither linear nor uniformly beneficial. Its effects varied across regions, and often reinforced inequalities, particularly between more and less integrated economies. Yet, it established a shared structural environment, in which expectations of peace, cooperation, and convergence became both: intelligible and politically meaningful, in particular, in highly integrated societies.[11]

Politically, international and regional institutions aimed to manage disputes and reduce conflict. Organisations such as the League of Nations, and later the United Nations, sought to embed peace within institutional frameworks. Regional projects, particularly in Europe, stabilised relations by cohering states to shared legal and political systems.[12]

Economic integration strengthened interdependence via reduced trade barriers, expanded markets, and cross-border investment. It was expected to increase prosperity and raise the costs of conflict, reinforcing peaceful relations despite uneven outcomes.[13]

Social and cultural processes deepened these trends. Mobility, migration, and communication increased interaction, while cultural exchange through literature, media, education, and the arts facilitated the diffusion of norms and ideas across borders. This did not erase cultural differences, but it widened the range of experiences and

10 Scholte J.A. 2008, 1471–1502.

11 Rodrik D. 2011, 117–140.

12 Mazower M. 2012.

13 Keohane R.O., Nye J.S. 1977.

perspectives to which individuals were exposed, often bringing distant societies into everyday awareness. Greater exposure to distant crises, humanitarian challenges, and social struggles made global events more immediate and understandable, empowering a stronger sense of interdependence and shared vulnerability.

Technological change accelerated these dynamics. Progress in transport and communication technology reduced distance and enabled near real-time global interaction. The notion of a "global village", initially mentioned in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan,[14] gradually moved from metaphor to social reality. Technology did not merely support globalisation. It fundamentally altered conditions under which political, economic, and social interactions took place. The concept became increasingly concrete, as different dimensions of globalisation reinforced one another.[15]

By the end of the Cold War, these processes converged in a period of strong optimism. The collapse of bipolar rivalry and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower lessened fears of large-scale conflict.

Confidence in integration was widespread. In Europe, the development of the European Union was seen as proof that cooperation could overcome historical conflict and institutionalise liberal governance beyond the nation-state, despite emerging challenges of legitimacy and representation.[16]

Beyond Europe, China's economic opening was widely interpreted as supporting convergence. Although the 1989 Tiananmen repression revealed limits to reform, it was often viewed as temporary. While China later achieved major economic transformation, this did not lead to full political liberalisation. Nonetheless, the prevailing belief remained that increased connectivity would promote more peaceful and stable forms of coexistence.

Fukuyama's Assumptions and the Limits of Post-Cold War Convergence

It was within this context that Francis Fukuyama articulated his interpretation of the post-Cold War moment. In the early 1990s, he argued that ideological conflict had reached its endpoint, with liberal democracy and market capitalism representing the most viable form of organisation. History was framed as an evolutionary process, in which alternative systems had been tested and found inadequate.[17]

His argument resonated because it reflected observable trends, such as expanding representative institutions, global market integration, and declining ideological

14 McLuhan M. 1962.

15 Held D. et al. 1999.

16 Fukuyama F. 2007.

17 Fukuyama F. 1992, 211–286.

confrontation. It did not claim conflict would disappear, but that large-scale wars driven by ideology had become less likely under deepening integration. Thus, Fukuyama's thesis synthesised developments already underway, capturing a widely shared belief that a new historical phase had emerged, grounded in lived experience, institutional change, and growing war aversion.

This interpretation drew on earlier traditions. Like Karl Marx, Fukuyama viewed history as directional, but arrived at a fundamentally different conclusion regarding its endpoint. While Marx anticipated the transcendence of capitalism through revolutionary transformation, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy had proven adaptable enough to mitigate inequalities that Marx considered structurally irresolvable. In this sense, Fukuyama's thesis can be understood not as a rejection of teleological reasoning, but as its inversion, replacing revolutionary rupture with institutional adaptation as the mechanism of historical resolution.[18]

While inequality persists, global poverty declined and inequality trends became more complex, with empirical measures, such as the Gini coefficient, indicating diverging patterns between and within countries.[19] These developments challenge the idea of an inevitable and irreversible concentration of wealth, suggesting instead that capitalism possesses a degree of adaptive capacity absent from Marx's original formulation. From this perspective, Marx's diagnosis appears historically contingent, shaped by the conditions of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism rather than indicative of a universal structural trajectory.

This comparison raises a broader analytical question. If Marx's conclusions were shaped by the structural realities of his time, it becomes necessary to consider whether Fukuyama's own thesis was similarly conditioned by the specific circumstances of the late twentieth century. The plausibility of his argument in the early 1990s derived from observable trends, such as democratic expansion, economic integration, and declining tolerance for war, but these trends were not immune to reversal. Thus, despite their opposing conclusions, both Marx and Fukuyama may be seen as advancing historically grounded interpretations that risk overextending contingent developments into universal endpoints.

From the outset, these assumptions were contested. Jacques Derrida questioned the notion of historical closure, emphasising ongoing instability and unresolved contradictions.[20] Others doubted that political and economic liberalisation would progress together.[21]

18 Marx K. 1976.

19 *Gini Index*. 2025.

20 Derrida J. 1993.

21 Albert M. 1991.

Further critiques focused on the relationship between capitalism and democracy. Slavoj Žižek argued that market systems could persist without democratic accountability, while democracies might diverge from liberal economic models. The coexistence of economic integration with political authoritarianism challenged assumptions of convergence.[22]

Fukuyama later refined his position, shifting towards institutional analysis. In his later works, he identified effective state capacity, rule of law, and democratic accountability as key to a stable order, acknowledging risks of institutional decay and regression.[23] While maintaining that no superior alternative existed, he recognised the fragility of political systems.[24]

These debates do not refute his thesis but reveal its conditional nature. Convergence was grounded in real developments, yet depended on assumptions about institutional adaptability and social acceptance. The persistence of integration alongside instability suggests that structural progress alone cannot ensure peace or democratic consolidation.

From a *Collective Action Theory* perspective, the divergence between post-Cold War optimism and later developments cannot be explained solely by institutions or ideology. It requires analysing how societies adapt their perceptions and tolerance levels over time. These dynamics form the basis for the empirical analysis that follows.

Democracy, Freedom, and Changing Constraints on Political Action

Before analysing post-Cold War developments, it is necessary to distinguish the phenomena of democracy and freedom. Schumpeter,[25] Dahl,[26] and Przeworski[27] define democracy procedurally as a system of competitive elections enabling political rivalry and change of power. Freedom includes substantive civil liberties, such as expression, association, and the rule of law. Although often correlated, they are distinct.

In order to assess electoral mechanisms and civil liberties separately, the article uses the *Freedom House* database,[28] complemented by Polity[29] and V-Dem.[30] Longitudinal data show initial democratic growth followed by decline. The early 1990s

22 Žižek S. 2009, 131–150.

23 Fukuyama F. 1999, 252–284.

24 Fukuyama F. 2014.

25 Schumpeter J.A. 1943.

26 Dahl R.A. 1989.

27 Przeworski A., Alvarez M., Cheibub J.A., Limongi F. 2000.

28 *Freedom House*. 2024.

29 *The Polity Project*. 2021.

30 *V-Dem: Varieties of Democracy*. 2025.

saw a peak in countries considered Free or Partly Free, reflecting post-authoritarian transitions and liberalisation. However, since 2009, democratic backsliding has been predominant. The process was gradual, including weakened checks and balances, reduced media pluralism, and politicised institutions.

Patterns differ across regimes. In democracies, erosion often concentrates on executive overreach, while in hybrid systems, competition usually coexists with repression. Finally, in fully authoritarian regimes, crises reinforce centralisation. Despite of differences, a common implication is to be found. As accountability weakens, the range of contestable decisions narrows, expanding what becomes politically realistic. This includes not only changes in domestic governance, but also a reduced capacity or willingness to restrain coercive practices, both internally and externally. As institutional checks diminish and civil liberties are limited, the political and social price associated with the use of force decreases, making conflict, or conflict-like forms of governance, more likely to be tolerated or pursued.

From Post-Cold War Optimism to the Normalisation of Insecurity (2000–2026)

These shifts developed through cumulative shocks with transnational effects, gradually altering perceptions of stability, cooperation, and risk. The post-war economic framework, established at Bretton Woods, initially stabilised global finance and supported growth through regulated integration. The transformation in the aftermath of the fall of fixed exchange rates, deregulation, and increased capital mobility, though contributing to a greater interdependence, also led to systemic vulnerability.

This became evident during the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, a critical shock with lasting political consequences. The collapse of major financial institutions and subsequent interventions exposed systemic fragility. Economic hardship, unemployment, and public bailouts undermined trust in institutions and highlighted perceived inequalities, particularly the socialisation of losses alongside privatised gains.

The crisis weakened confidence in governance and expert authority. Failures of regulation and forecasting challenged assumptions of technocratic control, while narratives of systemic unfairness gained traction. This erosion of trust extended beyond economics, reshaping perceptions of risk, stability, and vulnerability.[31]

Security developments reinforced this trend. The attacks of 11 September 2001 exposed new vulnerabilities and challenged assumptions about declining large-scale violence. Subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq reintroduced war as a central instrument of policy, contributing to its gradual normalisation.[32]

31 Rodrik D. 2011, 156–165.

32 Benjamin D., Simon S. 2002.

The Arab Spring further destabilised regions. While initially seen as democratic mobilisation, the uprisings exposed underlying institutional fragilities and power vacuums, and in several cases, led to prolonged conflict and state fragmentation, particularly in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The absence of predefined political frameworks, combined with the intervention of regional and global actors, limited prospects for democratic consolidation and instead contributed to sustained instability.

In affected societies, protracted turmoil shifted priorities towards order over democratic aspirations, increasing tolerance for coercive governance. This shift reflected not ideological preference, but adaptive responses to insecurity as fragmented authority and persistent violence altered perceptions of what forms of governance were viable.[33]

These dynamics were not regionally confined. Migration flows, particularly during the 2015 crisis, intensified political tensions in Europe. Although driven largely by socioeconomic factors, migration became associated in public discourse with security risks, amplifying polarisation. Political actors reframed migration as a question of sovereignty, transforming it into a focal point for broader anxieties. Because a substantial proportion of migrants originated from Muslim-majority countries, segments of public discourse increasingly associated migration flows with the threat of radical Islamist terrorism, an interpretation amplified by certain media outlets and political actors.[34]

Similar patterns appeared elsewhere. Across different contexts, complex challenges were simplified through attribution to identifiable groups, enabling the mobilisation of exclusionary agendas. In the United States, this was reflected in the politicisation of migration mostly from Latin America, while in Russia, restrictive measures toward Central Asian migrants intensified following the Crocus City Hall attack, illustrating comparable dynamics across both democratic and non-democratic settings. Despite institutional differences, these processes converged in expanding acceptance of securitised and confrontational politics.

At the same time, renewed violence emerged globally, often following periods of relative stability in regions previously considered contained or dormant. This included conflicts in Sudan and parts of the Sahel, renewed escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and intensifying violence in Myanmar, alongside border clashes, such as those between India and Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Cambodia and Thailand, after years of relative calm, as well as increasing militarisation. Even where not constituting full-scale war, these developments blurred distinctions between peace and conflict, reinforcing the perception that force remained a viable instrument.

Taken together, these developments indicate gradual transformation, rather than abrupt rupture. Economic disruption, institutional erosion, and visible conflict interacted to lower tolerance thresholds. Each crisis, framed as exceptional, normalised the next.

33 Al-Marashi I. 2018, 147–164.

34 de Haas H. 2018, 1145–1166.

This cumulative process reshaped attitudes towards force, governance, and inequality. Its significance lies not only in events themselves, but in the shifting tolerance that accompanied them. Understanding this requires analysing how collective perceptions evolve and coordinate over time.[35] Hence, the social shifts mark the gradual emergence of the post-post-Cold War state, as continued interconnectedness becomes largely detached from shared expectations of cooperation, as well as restraint.

Collective Action, Regime Type, and Shifting Levels of Acceptance

Collective Action Theory explains how societies respond to simultaneous political, economic, and security shocks. Individuals act not only on their own preferences, but on expectations about others and perceived legitimacy. Therefore, political order and tolerance are not fixed, but reflect evolving thresholds formed by coordination.[36]

This helps explain why societies accept outcomes once seen as unacceptable. If individuals believe others will also comply, dissent becomes costly and compliance rational. Over time, what is considered normal or legitimate is redefined. This does not require ideological support. Compliance may stem from uncertainty, resignation, or lack of alternatives. Crucially, this process manifests across multiple domains, including the acceptance of constraints on civil liberties, the erosion of democratic safeguards, and the growing willingness to tolerate coercion and potential conflict.

In the post-Cold War period, shocks were framed as temporary exceptions requiring extraordinary measures. From a *Collective Action* perspective, repetition is the key. When such measures recur, they become normalised. Restrictions, militarisation, and reduced expectations of cooperation shift from deviations to adaptations, lowering the levels of resistance. As a result, limitations on freedoms, institutional weakening, and the use of coercive instruments increasingly appear as pragmatic responses, rather than exceptional measures.[37]

This process reflects coordination dynamics, rather than consensus. Individuals adjust behaviour based on expectations of others, while crisis framing reduces perceived agency. A self-reinforcing cycle emerges. Lower expectations justify stricter policies, which further reduce expectations. In this way, reduced civil liberties and weakened democratic constraints reinforce one another, while simultaneously lowering resistance to the broader use of force. As tolerance narrows domestically, it expands externally, increasing acceptance of enforced actions.

35 Finkel D. 2024, 1–9.

36 Olson M. 1965, 5–42.

37 Agamben G. 2003.

These mechanisms operate differently across regimes. In democracies, governments respond to shifts in public tolerance. Increased acceptance of insecurity or exclusion may lead to expanded executive power and reduced oversight, often within formal legality. Foreign policy also adjusts to perceived voter tolerance.

In non-democratic systems, tolerance reduces the price of repression and enlarges acceptable state action. At the same time, uncoordinated dissatisfaction may stabilise regimes by failing to mobilise. Thus, similar dynamics can produce different outcomes depending on institutional context, without blaming natural resilience or passivity. However, the final effect lies in expanding the range of actions that can be undertaken across all regime types with limited resistance, including forced measures directed both: internally and externally.[38]

Longitudinal indicators, such as *Freedom House*, show a sustained global decline in political rights and civil liberties. This pattern reflects cumulative tolerance shifts, rather than isolated failures. These include incremental restrictions, perceived as necessary, accumulate over time. Such developments illustrate how reduced freedoms and weakened institutional constraints form part of a broader reconfiguration of acceptable governance.

Globalisation amplifies these very dynamics by accelerating the transfer of crises and narratives. Information spreads rapidly across borders, often without context, creating asymmetries in perception. The increased use of social media radicalises opinions. At the same time, the observed drop in interdependence reduces incentives for cooperation. If others are expected to act unilaterally, coordination appears irrational. Consequently, the tolerance for exclusion and unilateralism increases.

Under such conditions, force becomes a politically conceivable response without the need for explicit justification. Importantly, this applies not only to interstate conflict, but also to the normalisation of coercive practices within states, causing a wider change in the acceptance of force as a governing instrument.

Shifting tolerance does not determine outcomes but alters opportunity structures. As acceptance of exceptional measures and simplified narratives grows, space opens for actors who align with prevailing expectations. Their success depends less on persuasion than on articulating already normalised sentiments.

This marks the transition from perception to mobilisation. Changes in tolerance contribute to political outcomes, shaping both domestic governance and expectations of international conduct, including the permissibility of force. In summary, these developments demonstrate that reduced civil liberties, weakened democratic constraints, and the increasing acceptance of coercion are not independent trends, but interconnected manifestations of a wider shift in collective expectations.[39]

38 Acemoglu D., Robinson J.A. 2012.

39 Moffitt B. 2016, 22–45.

Populism as a Collective Outcome of Post-Globalisation Disillusionment

As shown, the post-Cold War period involved a gradual shift in tolerance towards insecurity, institutional fragility, and exclusion. These changes arose less from ideological mobilisation than from cumulative crises that altered expectations about what political systems could deliver. Populist movements emerged as actors articulating sentiments that had already become socially acceptable.

While often seen as drivers of democratic erosion, populism is better understood as a consequence of prior transformations in collective expectations. Following the 'thin-centred ideology' approach, it constructs a moral divide between "the people" and "the elite", opposing institutional constraints and liberal norms. However, the key mechanism lies in *Collective Action Theory*.[40] Diverse economic, security-related, and symbolic shocks translate into mobilisation through shared perceptions. In democratic systems, this is reinforced when institutional trust declines.[41]

Populist success depends less on coherent programmes than on coordination. Individuals support such actors not necessarily out of agreement, but because they believe others share their dissatisfaction. Once this belief spreads, resistance weakens, even among sceptics.

In Europe, populism was often aligned with Euroscepticism. Supranational institutions, especially the EU, became focal points for discontent. Unlike national governments, the EU relied on technocratic reasoning, rather than emotionally resonant narratives, which reduces the ability to mobilise support under stress. Populist actors exploited this asymmetry.

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU illustrates these dynamics. The referendum reflected declining tolerance for supranational governance, rather than a reaction to specific policies. Even though direct exposure to Eurozone or migration pressures was limited, wider European crises, mostly financial instability and migration flows, damaged the perceived credibility of integration. Amplified domestically, these developments fostered a generalised perception of dysfunction.

In this context, the referendum functioned as a coordination mechanism. Diverse grievances converged into a binary choice, where agreement on leaving outweighed disagreement on alternatives. Once this threshold was reached, the complexity of withdrawal became secondary.

A similar pattern appeared in the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Populist mobilisation translated diffuse dissatisfaction, economic disruption, prolonged conflict, and perceived elite detachment, into electoral coordination. "America First" rhetoric

40 Mudde C., Rovira Kaltwasser C. 2017, 1–13.

41 Hawley K. 2012, 94–114.

signalled reduced willingness to prioritise external commitments, resonating with voters seeking clearer boundaries between domestic and global responsibilities.

Although often described as neo-isolationist, U.S. policy remained engaged but more selective and less predictable. Withdrawals from international agreements, trade measures, and pressure on alliances reflected reduced reliance on multilateral frameworks. This did not amount to disengagement, but to a shift toward transactional, contingent interaction.[42]

From this perspective, Trump's presidency is better seen as a manifestation of altered expectations than their cause. As tolerance for deviation from cooperative norms increased, the costs of unilateralism declined. His second presidency continued this pattern, reinforcing selective engagement and strategic ambiguity.

This was evident in key contexts: conditional support in Ukraine, interest-driven positioning in the Middle East, and transactional approaches to allies. Actions, such as the strike on Iran, conducted without prior coordination, reinforced perceptions of volatility and reduced predictability. Global engagement persisted, but was reframed as leader-driven, rather than institutionally mediated.

Therefore, neo-isolationism did not entail withdrawal, but a reconfiguration of participation, including scepticism toward institutions, preference for bilateralism, and instrumental use of interdependence. Populist narratives enabled this change by reconciling activeness with claims of sovereignty and control.

These developments resonated in a broader environment of declining trust and fatigue with international commitments. The weakening of cooperative norms reduced constraints not only domestically but globally, encouraging similar behaviour among other actors.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine as a Systemic Rupture

The preceding analysis shows how shifting expectations reshaped domestic and international behaviour. Their systemic implications became fully visible with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The invasion represents a qualitative rupture in the post-Cold War order, particularly in Europe. Unlike earlier conflicts, it involved large-scale conventional force aimed at territorial revision, directly challenging the norm of territorial inviolability. This norm relied less on enforcement than on shared expectations of restraint. Therefore, its breach affects the logic of interstate behaviour beyond the battlefield.[43]

42 McConnell M. 2025, 127.

43 Kurkov A. 2022.

The return of sustained interstate war marks a shift in what is considered feasible and acceptable. Yet the continued use of terms such as "Special Military Operation" indicates that war remains normatively problematic, suggesting not a disappearance of post-Cold War norms but their selective circumvention. The invasion is not treated as an isolated cause, but as a sociological watershed consolidating prior trends, such as increasing tolerance towards force, exclusion, and unilateralism. Its significance lies in its precedent-setting effect. Violations of established norms, combined with limited enforcement, recalibrate expectations of what states may attempt and societies may tolerate across regime types.

Therefore, the mentioned rupture caused by the invasion crystallises the earlier-defined post-post-Cold War condition, in which established norms remain formally recognised, but their capacity to sustain common expectations of restraint is continuously contested.

Collective Action Theory helps explain how such a breakdown occurred without widespread ideological support for war. The invasion emerged within a context of cumulative tolerance shifts shaped by repeated crises. Over time, societies adapted to exceptional measures justified by security, economic instability, and uncertainty. Each episode, framed as temporary, normalised departures from constraints.

Within this environment, the Russian leadership was able to anticipate and strategically exploit limited coordination of resistance, domestically as well as, in part, internationally. *Collective Action Theory* dynamics lowered acquiescence thresholds, but these conditions were not merely incidental. They were rather actively reinforced through continuous political messaging, control of information, and the framing of external threats. Individuals did not necessarily support war but perceived resistance as ineffective or isolated. Hence, acceptance did not require endorsement, only the expectation that others would follow the same course. Under such conditions, compliance becomes the default equilibrium.

The invasion illustrates how force can re-enter political practice without a corresponding change in declared values. It also expands the perceived range of possible actions, making escalation elsewhere more conceivable.

Conclusion

The consequences of the invasion extend beyond Europe. The accumulation of crises has contributed both: to the conditions enabling the invasion and to a broader easing of constraints on force. Increased militarisation, cross-border tensions, and revived disputes reflect this shift. Each instance of norm erosion further lowers the perceived cost of deviation, while parallel developments in governance, including restrictions on civil liberties and the weakening of democratic safeguards, reinforce this broader change in acceptable political action.

The key implication is not the emergence of a new ideological rival but the erosion of shared restraints. Fukuyama's argument assumed that certain conflicts had become irrational within prevailing norms. In this sense, his thesis appears only partially borne out. While liberal democracy has not been decisively displaced, the expectation of its uncontested and stabilising dominance has not materialised. The scale of the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates more clearly than any other events that his assumption no longer holds in practice, not because alternative models have prevailed, but because the social conditions that sustained restraint have weakened. What has changed is not institutional superiority, but the altered perception of what means remain acceptable.

Thus, the current world stage can be described as post-post-Cold War. Globalisation and interconnectedness persist but no longer provide common expectations of cooperation and restraint. This condition reflects an uneven transformation in perceptions of what is possible and acceptable, without implying a universally applicable date of transition or the complete disappearance of the preceding order. Acquiescence under perceived necessity mirrors adaptive resignation, rather than ideological change, accompanied by a greater tolerance for more coercive and less constrained forms of governance. Societies lower their expectations, redefining stability in minimal terms.

From a *Collective Action Theory* perspective, the true risk lies in half-hearted escalation. If collective outcomes are sustained by acceptance, rather than belief, conflict may proceed without widely shared aims or committed public support. Thus, the danger need not depend on enthusiasm for war but may also arise from the perception that alternatives no longer exist. Such perceptions can develop as repeated crises lower expectations of recovery, simultaneously broadening acceptance of measures previously regarded as undesirable. Their normalisation may be reflected in several seemingly unrelated developments.

European hopes for democratisation during the Arab Spring increasingly competed with priorities of stabilisation and migration control. Similarly, the British government's 2025 reset with the EU sought improvements while excluding a return to the single market or customs union.[44] Meanwhile, support for restoring conscription in Sweden rose from 35% in 2010 to 62% in 2016,[45] and in 2025, Poland and the Baltic states invoked the Russian threat when recommending withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention prohibiting anti-personnel mines.[46] Germany's extension of internal border controls in 2024, justified partly by efforts to curb irregular migration, likewise illustrates political acceptance of restrictions on border-free travel. Growing disenchantment with the United States also reached traditionally pro-American societies.

44 Starmer K. 2025.

45 Salonius-Pasternak C. 2018, 7.

46 *Statement*. 2025.

For instance, favourable views in Poland fell by at least 20 percentage points between 2024 and 2025.[47] Taken together, these events suggest how diminished confidence in established arrangements can accompany reduced ambitions and greater acceptance of restrictive or coercive responses. Partial relief may become the measure of success, while restoring earlier conditions appears largely remote. Hence, the re-legitimation of force, both externally and in more coercive forms of domestic governance, does not indicate a return to past ideological conflicts, but a change in how societies interpret necessity, constraint, and feasibility.

Reversal remains possible as tolerance thresholds are not fixed. However, it requires restoring shared expectations that once made force politically costly. This would involve not only institutional repair, but the re-establishment of confidence in collective resistance to coercion, whether in the form of war, weakened democracy, or reduced civil liberties. Without this, the post-Cold War assumption of war's obsolescence may give way to a more permissive equilibrium, in which conflict is not desired, but no longer actively resisted.

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War Memories of Erik Wesslén, Secretary of the Swedish Victoria Congregation in Berlin, 1942–1945. Part 1

Summary: This publication presents an edition of the wartime memories of Erik Wesslén (1918–1964), a Swede who, from the autumn of 1943 until the end of the Second World War, served as secretary to Pastor Erik Perwe and after his death in November 1944, to Pastor Erik Myrgren at the Swedish Victoria Congregation (*Svenska Victoriagörsamlingen*) in Berlin. Based on unique archival materials made available by Wesslén's son, Kjell Wesslén, the study outlines the Wesslén's life and highlights the humanitarian role played by the Swedish congregation. This edition makes available for the first time Wesslén's complete typescript memories (Berlin. Minnen åren 1942–1945), translated into German. The present publication contains the first part of the memories (Parts 1–6), while the second and final part will be published in the next issue of "Faces of War".

Keywords: Erik Wesslén, Swedish Victoria Congregation in Berlin, Second World War, Erik Perwe, wartime memories, humanitarian aid, Berlin 1942–1945

Introduction

The eventful history of the Swedish church congregation in Berlin, the Victoria Congregation (Fig. 1), founded in 1903, is described in the 2003 anniversary book, with several contributions addressing the turbulent war years under pastors Birger Forell,

1 The author is a retired professor and researcher affiliated with the above institutions.

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Erik Perwe, and Erik Myrgren (Fig. 2–5).[2] Erik Wesslén is also occasionally mentioned in this context. He arrived in Berlin from Sweden in April 1942 to further his training in horticulture, but in the autumn of 1943, he was employed by Erik Perwe as the congregation's secretary, playing an important role until the end of the war. As early as 1993, Felicitas Bothe-von Richthoven addressed the role of the Swedish Victoria Congregation in her book on resistance in Wilmersdorf, also mentioning him in this context.[3] Other publications also mention the subject.[4] A particularly important book is in Swedish by Johan Perwe, Erik Perwe's grandson, in which Wesslén is frequently discussed.[5] In the 2022 yearbook of the Berlin State Archives (*Landesarchiv Berlin*), the article *Helfer in der Not* deals with the humanitarian activities of the congregation during this period and also refers to Wesslén's activities and his unpublished wartime memories, written in Swedish.[6]

I contacted Erik Wesslén's son, Kjell Wesslén, who was born in Berlin in 1944. I visited him and his wife Kristina on Ekerö in Lake Mälaren near Stockholm in the summer of 2024 to learn more about his father. During this visit, all the sources in their possession were generously made available to me for examination and use, and permission was granted to publish the father's wartime memories. It turned out that a typewritten transcript, previously mentioned occasionally, is incomplete, as three of the „memories" are missing from it. I have now included these and translated everything into German, thus ensuring that an interesting source for the history of Berlin and the Swedish church congregation there has been preserved for posterity.

Erik Wesslén, born on 11 November 1918, came from an old, well-to-do family from the province of Uppland, north of Stockholm.[7] After attending school in Stockholm, receiving training at the Horticultural School of the Agricultural Academy and in the palace garden at Tullgarn, as well as completing military service at various times between 1939 and 1941, he received permission in 1942 to travel to Germany to further his professional training. His first employment was with Adolf Grille Söhne Gartenbau in Berlin-Weißensee from 8 April 1942 to 31 March 1943.[8] Afterwards, he moved to the large nursery of the Späth company in Treptow-Köpenick. However, his training there was short-lived due to the war, and in autumn 1943 he was employed by Pastor Erik Perwe as secretary of the Victoria congregation. He held this position until the end of the war. Afterwards, together with other Swedes, he returned from Berlin to Sweden via Russia but now had great difficulty finding his bearings. In Berlin he had

2 Ekdahl S. (ed.), 2003.

3 Bothe-von Richthoven F. 1993, 147–159, especially: 152.

4 See for example: Lundberg L. 2011; Flohr M. 2016.

5 Perwe J. 2018.

6 Ekdahl S. 2024, 125–146, especially 137.

7 [Wesslén Gösta] 1930.

8 His certificate dated 31 March 1943, issued by Alfred Grille, has been preserved (Fig. 8).

played an important role in certain circles; in Sweden he was once again simply a gardener, hotel porter, etc. He did try to enter the plant business, but with little success. In a letter dated 2 December 1955, it says:

> Things are going badly for me. In the autumn I worked at the Stockholm Free Port, but a few days ago I fell from a railway wagon, broke five ribs, and had to have a wound above one of my eyes stitched. It was bad luck, but I have now recovered and must expect to rest for 4–6 weeks.[9]

Wesslén kept his private life largely out of the public eye, and relatively little is known about it. On 31 July 1943, he married Karin, the daughter of the Jewish retired *Regierungsbaumeister*[10] Felix Hirschberg, who was of Protestant faith and married to the Swedish woman Greta Gustafsson,[11] at the Swedish Congregation in Berlin. The marriage ceremony was conducted by Erik Perwe, who also baptised their son Kjell, born on 15 May 1944 (Fig. 6–7). Three years later, a second son, Johan, was born in Sweden; he now lives in the United States. The marriage was dissolved in 1951, and Karin raised both sons. She died in 2024 at the age of 102. Erik Wesslén was either unable or unwilling to fulfil his financial obligations towards his children, and many bills remained unpaid. The amount of debt recorded in the estate inventory — 35,000 kronor — is exceptionally high.[12] A letter from the prosecution authorities in Stockholm dated 3 October 1963 even refers to the arrested gardener Erik Wesslén.[13] His troubled circumstances in Sweden, however, will not be discussed in greater detail here.

Erik Wesslén's life ended abruptly in the run-up to Christmas 1964, when he wanted to visit acquaintances in Germany. On 18 December, in Köping, he traded his Austin for a Volvo 444, and on 21 December he drove to Scania, where he planned to spend the night in Anderslöv, not far from Trelleborg. He wanted to meet Pastor Erik Myrgren in Scania and then take the ferry from Trelleborg to Germany.

The surviving inn bill shows that the room, including service, cost 15 kronor, while the total bill came to 75 kronor, largely because of the purchase of alcohol. These were presumably intended mainly as gifts.

When he left the inn on 22 December, he was involved in a head-on collision with an oncoming Mercedes driven by a local woman. He died from *Contusia thoracis*,

9 Letter in the possession of Kjell Wesslén.

10 Regierungsbaumeister was a German professional title associated with the state building administration, awarded to qualified architects and civil engineers after the completion of the required professional training and examinations.

11 Recipient of the Iron Cross during the First World War. See: „Vossische Zeitung" 506, 4.

12 Estate inventory dated 17 March 1965. Of this sum, 25,000 kronor constituted unpaid maintenance for the children.

13 Judgment of the Stockholm City Court dated 24 September 1963. Copy in the possession of Kjell Wesslén.

Laceratio cordis,[14] while the woman escaped with less serious injuries. He was responsible for causing the accident, but the precise cause remains unclear.[15]

His body was autopsied in Lund, cremated in Falun, and the urn was buried on 29 December 1964 in the Forest Chapel in Falun. The grave was later levelled due to a misunderstanding.[16]

War Memories

For posterity, it is valuable that Wesslén recorded some of his memories from the war years. It was not his intention to provide a consistently chronological and coherent account; rather, it was a mixture of somewhat longer descriptions and shorter accounts of events that he considered worth mentioning. This is evident from a list found among his papers, which he entitled *Berlin. Minnen åren 1942–1945* (*Berlin. Memories from the Years 1942–1945*) structured into the following parts:

1. Departure for Germany. The first year in Berlin. General impressions and working conditions (*Abreise nach Deutschland. Das erste Jahr in Berlin. Allgemeine Eindrücke und die Arbeitsverhältnisse*)
2. Lars Birbach, an ambitious man married to a Swedish woman, fleeing the Gestapo and travelling to Sweden (*Lars Birbach, Streber und verheiratet mit einer Schwedin, auf der Flucht vor Gestapo und Reise nach Schweden*)
3. The Lee Affair, an Allied master spy who operated in Berlin from January to March 1945 (*Die Affäre Lee, alliierter Spitzenspion, der in Berlin während Jan.-März 1945 arbeitete*)
4. Some impressions of 20 July 1944 in Berlin: the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler (*Einige Eindrücke vom 20. Juli 1944 in Berlin, das Attentat auf Adolf Hitler*)
5. The Gestapo sends a woman as an agent to the Swedish Church (*Gestapo schickt eine Frau als Agent zur Schwedischen Kirche*)
6. Gerhard Wagner, a friend and cheerful character, a magician when it came to settling matters (*Gerhard Wagner, Freund und Frohnatur, Zauberkünstler, als darum ging, Angelegenheiten zu regeln*)
7. The Swedish bunker, the end of the war, and the journey home via Moscow (*Der schwedische Bunker, das Kriegsende und die Heimreise über Moskau*)
8. The evacuation of the Swedish Home to Hohenholz and onward to Lübeck, as well as the evacuation of Swedes and people born in Sweden to Lübeck for onward

14 Death certificate issued by the Arboga parish in the province of Västmanland, dated 4 January 1965, in the possession of Kjell Wesslén.

15 The accident occurred on a country road near Stävesjö between Anderslöv and Börringekloster. Wesslén was therefore travelling north, probably to meet Erik Myrgren, who was a pastor in Hörby. The road is said to have been slippery.

16 Information provided by Kjell Wesslén. All sources are in his possession.

travel to their homeland (*Die Evakuierung des Schwedenheims nach Hohenholz und weiter nach Lübeck sowie die Evakuierung von Schweden und in Schweden Geborenen nach Lübeck für Weiterreise in die Heimat*)

9. The final months of the war in March–April 1945 (*Die letzten Kriegsmonate im März--April 1945*)
10. The flight of the Weissenberg couple from the Gestapo and from Berlin to Sweden (*Die Flucht des Ehepaars Weissenberg vor der Gestapo und von Berlin nach Schweden*)
11. Berlin's "Red Carnation", Countess Maltzan, sister-in-law of Field Marshal von Reichenau (*Berlins „Rote Nelke", die Gräfin Maltzan, Schwägerin des Generalfeldmarschalls von Reichenau*)
12. Erik Perwe, a legendary friend of Jews and detested by the Gestapo. The Swedish Church (*Erik Perwe, legendarischer Judenfreund und von der Gestapo verabscheut. Die Schwedische Kirche*)
13. [Blank]

To adhere more closely to the chronology of events, the order of these 12 parts was changed in this edition: 1, 12, 11, 10, 4, 5, 3, 6, 2, 8, 9, 7. Some of them were also given different headings. The blank space following Part 13 indicates that Wesslén intended to record further memories, which he never got around to doing. These include, for example, the major and successful rescue operation "Schwedenmöbel", which he carried out together with Pastor Perwe and Countess Maria von Maltzan on 28 August 1944.[17]

In the translation, some linguistic corrections to the names have been made without comment, and some of the rather long sentences have occasionally been divided.

This edition contains the first six parts of Erik Wesslén's memories, the remaining parts will be published in the next issue of "Faces of War".

I am grateful to Provost Pamela Garpefors of the Victoria Congregation in Berlin, Kjell Wesslén (son of Erik Wesslén), and Johan Perwe (grandson of Erik Perwe) for their kind assistance and for permission to reproduce the photographs in this publication.

17 See for example, the addendum *Die Aktion Schwedenmöbel* in: Ekdahl S. 2024, 138–146.



Fig. 1. The Swedish church in winter 1933. Photo by Victoria Brattström-Larén (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)

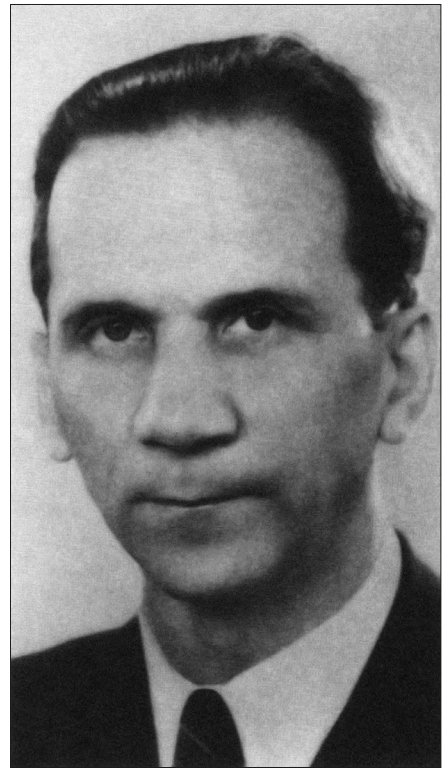


Fig. 2. Pastor Birger Forell, c. 1940 (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)



Fig. 3. A radio sermon by Pastor Erik Perwe (Source: Johan Perwe's private photo archive)



Fig. 4. A page from Pastor Erik Myrgren's photo album with a handwritten comment. The photograph, taken around the turn of 1944/1945, shows, from left, parish nurse Vide Ohman, Director Gösta Lundin, actress Kristina Söderbaum, director Veit Harlan, Mrs Dorothy Eriksson, and Pastor Erik Myrgren (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)

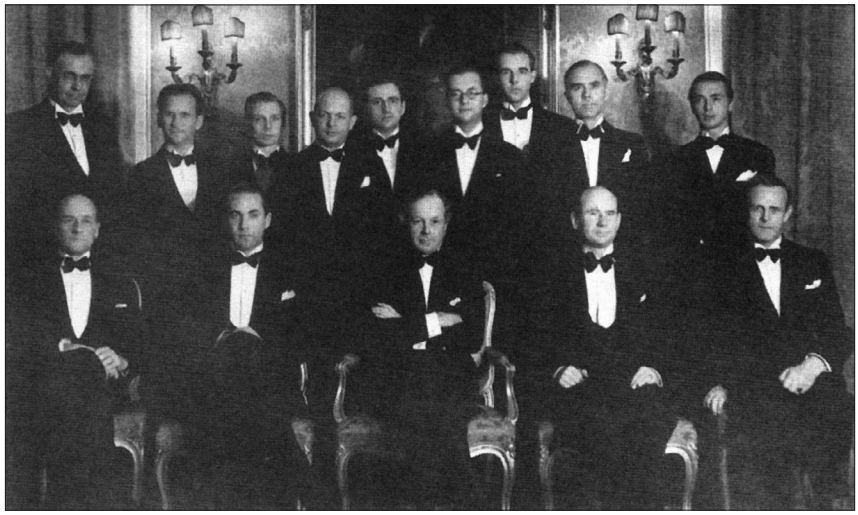


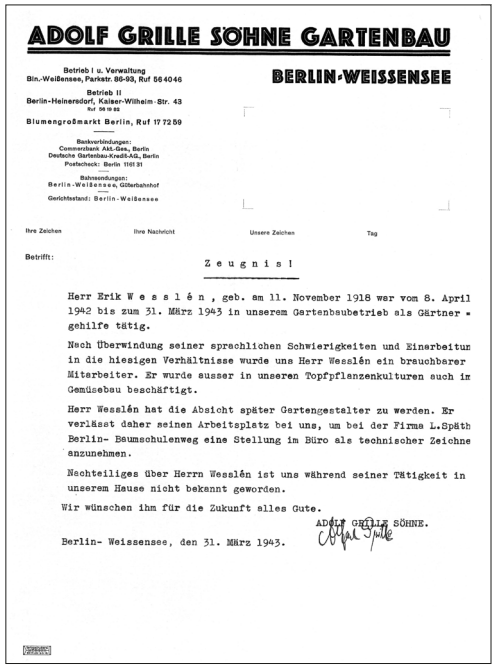
Fig. 5. The Swedish Legation in Berlin during Arvid Richert's tenure as Minister (seated, centre). Pastor Birger Forell is standing in the back row (second from left). (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)



Fig. 6. Erik Wesslén in Berlin in spring 1945. Photograph by Erik Myrgren. (Source: Victoria Congregation Photo Archive)



Fig. 7. Erik and Karin Wesslén at the baptism of their eldest son, Kjell, born on 15 May 1944, at the Swedish church in Berlin. Pastor Erik Perwe is on the right (Source: Kjell Wesslén's private photo archive)



ADOLF GRILLE SÖHNE GARTENBAU

BERLIN-WEISSENSEE

Betrieb I u. Verwaltung
Bln.-Weißensee, Parkstr. 86-93, Ruf 56 40 46

Betrieb II
Berlin-Heinersdorf, Kaiser-Wilhelm-Str. 43
Ruf 56 19 62

Blumengroßmarkt Berlin, Ruf 17 72 59

Bankverbindungen:
Commerzbank Akt.-Ges., Berlin
Deutsche Gartenbau-Kredit-AG., Berlin
Postscheck: Berlin 1101 31

Bahnsendungen:
Berlin-Weißensee, Güterbahnhof

Gerichtsstand: Berlin-Weißensee

Ihre Zeichen | Ihre Nachricht | Unsere Zeichen | Tag

Betrifft:

Z e u g n i s !

Herr Erik W e s s l é n , geb. am 11. November 1918 war vom 8. April 1942 bis zum 31. März 1943 in unserem Gartenbaubetrieb als Gärtner - gehilfe tätig.

Nach Überwindung seiner sprachlichen Schwierigkeiten und Einarbeitun in die hiesigen Verhältnisse wurde uns Herr Wesslén ein brauchbarer Miterbeiter. Er wurde ausser in unseren Topfpflanzenkulturen auch im Gemüsebau beschäftigt.

Herr Wesslén hat die Absicht später Gartengestalter zu werden. Er verlässt daher seinen Arbeitsplatz bei uns, um bei der Firma L.Späth Berlin- Baumschulenweg eine Stellung im Büro als technischer Zeichne anzunehmen.

Nachteiliges über Herrn Wesslén ist uns während seiner Tätigkeit in unserem Hause nicht bekannt geworden.

Wir wünschen ihm für die Zukunft alles Gute.

ADOLF GRILLE SÖHNE.

Berlin- Weissensee, den 31. März 1943.

Fig. 8. Erik Wesslén's certificate, dated 31 March 1943, issued by Adolf Grille Söhne Gartenbau in Berlin-Weißensee (Source: Kjell Wesslén's private photo archive)



Fig. 9. Erik Perwe's installation as pastor by Archbishop Erling Eidem on 8 November 1942. Photo by H. Hoffmann (Source: Johan Perwe's private photo archive)

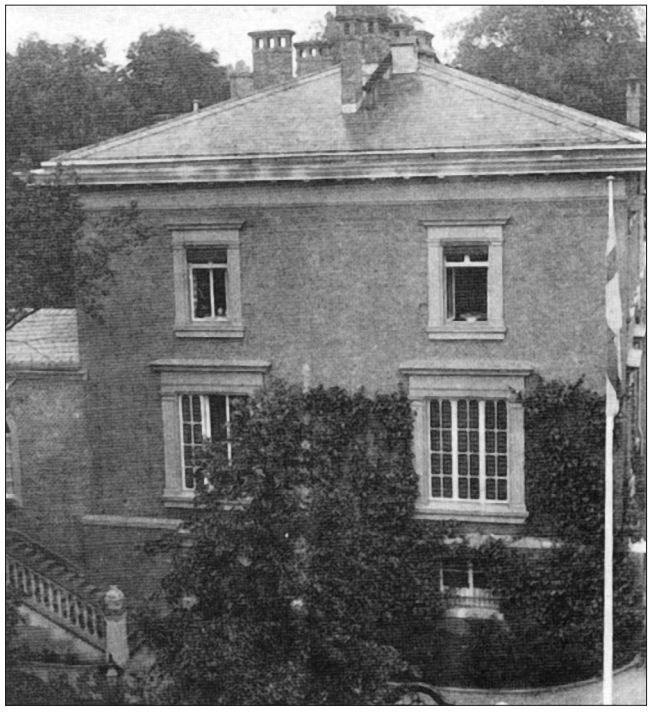


Fig. 10. The Swedish church seen from the Gestapo observation window on the opposite side of Landhausstraße (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)

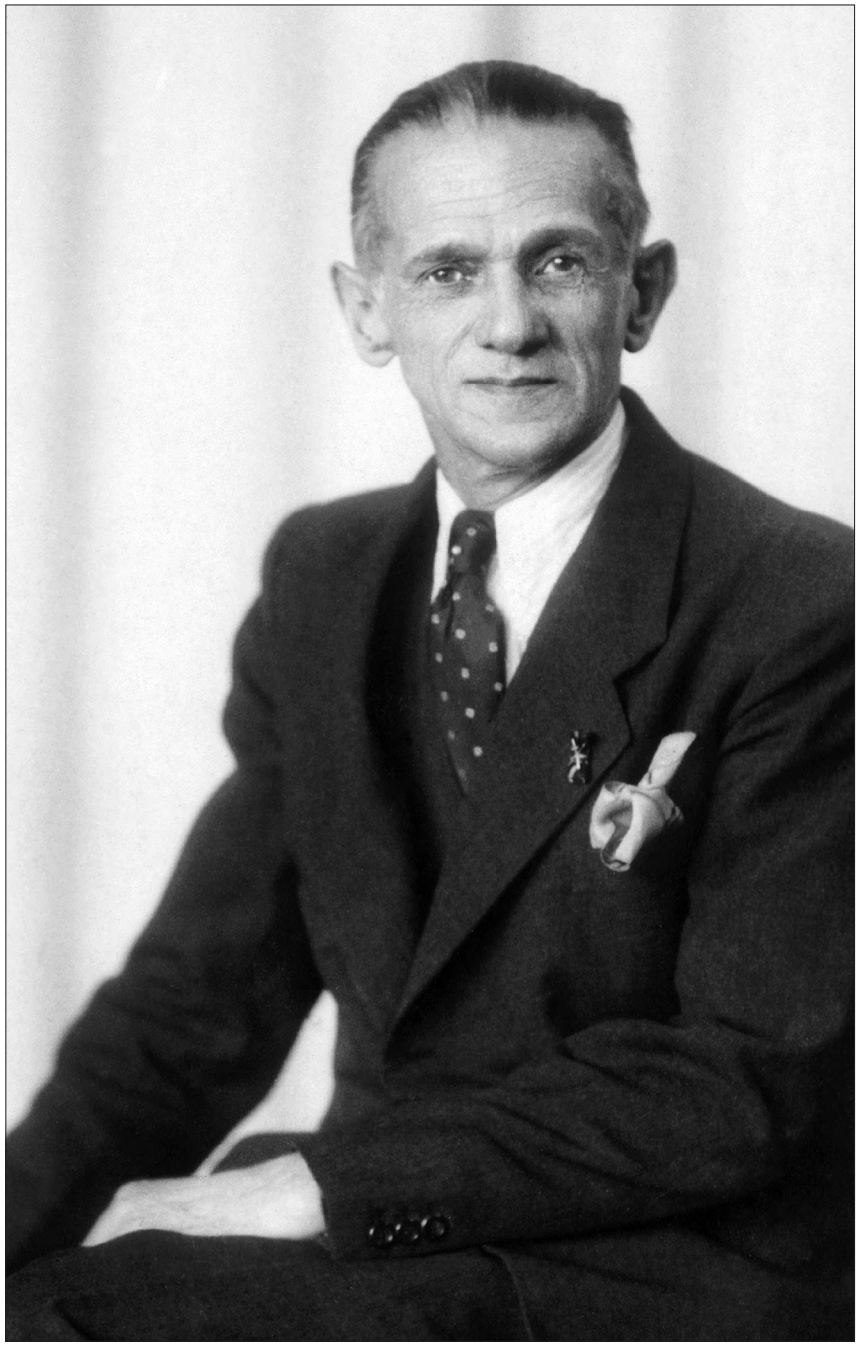


Fig. 11. Otto Weidt in 1943 (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)

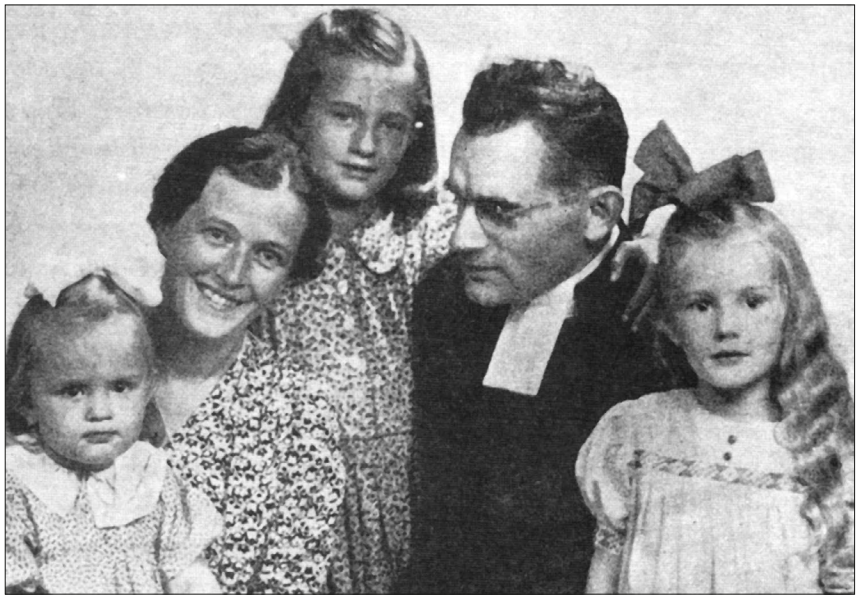


Fig. 12. Pastor Erik Perwe with his wife Märtha and their three eldest daughters. Their youngest daughter Gratia was born later (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)



Fig. 13. Pastor Erik Myrgren in the church park in autumn 1944 or spring 1945 (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)



Fig. 14. Maria Countess von Maltzan (Source: Victoria Congregation photo archive)

Erik Wesslén: Berlin April 1942 – 20. Mai 1945. Kriegserinnerungen

Abreise von Schweden nach Deutschland und das erste Jahr in Berlin

Alles begann mit einem langjährigen Militärdienst, der Wehrpflicht und dem Bereitschaftsdienst, und es schien, als hätte man eine Vollzeitbeschäftigung in den schwedischen Streitkräften bekommen. Um in meinem Beruf, dem Gartenbau, weiterzukommen, beantragte ich bei der Behörde Kungl. Maj:t eine Genehmigung, das Königreich im Winter 1942 zum Zweck der Studien im Ausland verlassen zu dürfen. Ich korrespondierte mit einer Gärtnerei in Berlin und bekam dort eine Anstellung angeboten. Am Ostermontag verließ ich Trelleborg nach vielem Hin und Her, das Packeis stoppte fast die Fähre nach Stettin, und ich kam am späten Abend in Warnemünde an.[18]

In ein Land zu kommen, das sich im Krieg befand, hatte mich nicht abgeschreckt, aber eine Stadt mit Stromausfall, tristen Restaurants, schlechtem Essen und vor allem Menschen, die deprimiert wirkten und kaum lächeln konnten, heiterten mich nicht gerade auf. Meine ersten vorsichtigen Kontakte mit den Bürgern von Berlin vermittelten mir einen starken Eindruck der Kriegsmüdigkeit, es schien, als wäre der Krieg für sie bereits verloren. Gewiss gab es junge Soldaten, vor allem aus der Waffen-SS, die in der Hitlerjugend erzogen waren, den Führer fanatisch verehrten und eine Einstellung vertraten, die mit dem demokratischen Gedankengut wenig gemeinsam hatte. Ich erinnere mich besonders an den fragenden Blick eines jungen Soldaten, als ich ihm mit Grüß Gott auf seinen Heil-Hitler-Gruß antwortete. Naja, das habe ich in den nächsten 2 Jahren mehrmals erlebt.

Aus einem Land zu kommen, wo man jedenfalls mit Lebensmittelkarten das Nötigste kaufen konnte und dann in einem Land im Krieg zu leben, da kann man schon mal über Kontraste sprechen. Wo man es zu Hause gewohnt war, in einem Kiosk einzukaufen, gab es hier Süßigkeiten oder Obst überhaupt nicht. Auch die Zugfahrt nach Berlin verlief in Moll, es war einfach nicht möglich, die Stimmung aufzuheitern. Ansonsten war der Deutsche sehr daran interessiert zu hören, wie es uns zu Hause geht, was wir kaufen dürfen, und ob wir damit rechneten, neutral bleiben zu können. Das waren so ziemlich meine ersten Eindrücke von Kriegsdeutschland.

Die Ankunft in der Millionenstadt Berlin erfolgte am späten zweiten Osterfeiertag und bald war ich im riesigen Stettiner Bahnhof und wusste nicht, welchen Weg ich gehen sollte. Durch Zufall traf ich die Lehrerin der schwedischen Victoria-Gemeinde, Irma Höök,[19] die mir half und mich in die Straßenbahn setzte, die nach Weißensee[20] fuhr.

18 Warnemünde – district in Rostock.

19 Irma Höök – Swedish teacher at the Victoriagemeinde School in Berlin, 1933–1943.

20 Weißensee – a district in northeastern Berlin.

Mein Chef, Karl Grille,[21] wusste nichts von meiner Ankunft und in der ersten Nacht wurde ich bei ihm untergebracht.

Karl Grille war in vielerlei Hinsicht ein bemerkenswerter Mann. Er war ein sehr großer Schwedenfreund, da er während der Wirtschaftskrise 6 Monate außerhalb von Alingsås[22] praktiziert und dort seine glücklichste Zeit erlebt hatte. Die Partei hatte vergeblich versucht, ihn als Parteimitglied zu gewinnen. Ich verstehe, dass sich Karl Grille auch heute noch über das Schreiben zufrieden fühlen muss, das er 1939 von der Parteiführung in Berlin erhielt und in dem ihm mitgeteilt wurde, dass er in Zukunft nicht mehr mit einer Aufnahme in die NSDAP rechnen könne, da er einem Juden zu dessen 60. Geburtstag mit einem beeindruckenden Blumenarrangement gratuliert hatte.

Die Familie Grille waren reizende Menschen und bemühten sich sehr um mich an diesem ersten Abend. In aller Eile war eingelegter Hering mit saurer Sahne zubereitet, etwas, das ich nie hatte essen können, aber ich konnte nur lächeln und kauen und kauen und lächeln. Das Haus war sehr modern und westlich. Auch merkte man vom ersten Moment an, zu welcher Seite Karl Grille gehörte.

„Grille Söhne Gartenbau" war eine beeindruckende Anlage mit ca. 150 Gewächshäusern in Weißensee und Heinersdorf, seinerzeit eine der größten in Europa und lag praktisch mitten in Berlin. Zu 90% waren es Topfpflanzen, aber nach einem Jahr kamen neue Vorschriften, und Grille musste mindestens 85% Küchenpflanzen anbauen. Es muss schwer gewesen sein, mit den Alpenveilchen- und Ficusplantagen aufhören zu müssen. Beispielsweise wurden jedes Jahr 50.000 Ficuspflanzen und die gleiche Menge Alpenveilchen verkauft.

Als Praktikant war ich der einzige, aber ungefähr 80 Ausländer arbeiteten dort mehr oder weniger freiwillig - Belgier und Niederländer, deren Väter in ihren jeweiligen Ländern große Gärtnereien hatten. Sehr beeindruckend war auch die enorme Menge an Blumenzwiebeln, die angebaut wurden, zwischen 4–5 Millionen.

Als Obergärtner arbeitete ein Mann, der dank seiner Parteiverdienste der Einberufung entgangen war, er war außerordentlich geschickt und sehr anspruchsvoll. Im Großen und Ganzen verstand ich mich gut mit ihm, aber wir stritten uns oft über politische Themen, bei denen ich Hitler und das Regime unverhohlen kritisierte, vielleicht vor allem, weil er ein dankbares Objekt der Kritik war und sich das immer zu Herzen nahm. Seltsam, dass er nie Anzeige erstattet hat, aber das lag wohl ausschließlich an seinem großen Respekt vor Karl Grille.

Man kann sagen, dass sehr gute Verhältnisse am Arbeitsplatz herrschten und es zu meiner Zeit keine Entlassungen gab.

21 Adolf Grille Söhne Gartenbau, Berlin-Weissensee. The brothers Alfred and Karl Grille survived the war and fled from the Soviet sector to the western part of Berlin in 1953, where they took over the Rothe Gartenbau business.

22 Alingsås – a city located 40 km northeast of Gothenburg.

Eine Unterkunft wurde mir gegenüber der Gärtnerei bei einem Ehepaar mittleren Alters vermittelt, der Mann ein untergeordneter Postbeamter und die Frau eine Hausfrau mit etwas zusätzlicher Reinigungsarbeit. Ein typisch deutsches Ehepaar, ein Heim im Jugendstil, verlässliche Parteigänger, ein typisches Produkt der Eloquenz von Dr. Goebbels. Hier muss ich eine Bemerkung machen: Abgesehen vom Nationalsozialismus war Goebbels ein Redner von seltener Klasse, ein Meister im Umgang mit der deutschen Sprache. Es war für mich ein Erlebnis, ihn zu hören, daher ist es leicht zu verstehen, dass viele Deutsche, zu viele, hinters Licht geführt wurden. Die Familie Günther hat alles dafür getan, dass ich mich wohlfühlte, und ab und zu gab es am Sonntagmorgen den einen oder anderen kleinen Kuchen. Das Essen wurde zu einem großen Problem, aber für etwas von zu Hause und die Pakete des Verbands der Auslandsschweden einmal im Monat war es erträglich. Fast alles war rationiert. Am schlimmsten war es mit Fleisch, 175 Gramm und Fett, 125 Gramm pro Woche. In den Restaurants gab es nur das sog. Stammgericht ohne Coupons. Kaffee gab es zweimal im Jahr und jeweils 50 Gramm, das Gleiche mit Alkohol, ¼ Liter zweimal im Jahr. Bei Grille konnte man für wenig Geld eine ordentliche Mahlzeit pro Tag bekommen, aber Kohlrabi stand leider manchmal bis zu viermal die Woche auf dem Speiseplan. Anderes Gemüse und Obst tauchten äußerst sporadisch auf.

In einigen Restaurants war es noch möglich, eine Flasche Wein zu bekommen, aber dann gab es die sogenannten speziellen Lokale, die der Parteikoryphäen, wo man, wenn man es schaffte, die betreffende Person zu bestechen oder zu schmieren, fast alles bekommen konnte. Unter uns Ausländern herrschte eine sehr gute Kameradschaft und der Zusammenhalt war hervorragend, Grille hat darunter nicht gelitten. Ich erinnere mich besonders an das Frühjahr 1943, als alle Leute Gemüsepflanzen kauften und wir es schafften, 60.000 Tomatenpflanzen zu ziehen.

Gehaltsmäßig war die Arbeit gut und ich selbst konnte 100 Reichsmark nach Schweden schicken. Die Steuer wurde an der Quelle erhoben und die Leistungen umfassten kostenlose medizinische Versorgung, Arbeitslosenversicherung, einige Zahnbehandlungen und garantierten Urlaub. Eine Reststeuer war nicht bekannt.

In meinem ersten Jahr war es größtenteils ziemlich ruhig. Nur sporadische Störflüge wurden von den Alliierten über Berlin durchgeführt. Der erste wirkliche Schaden, den ich sehen konnte, betraf eine alte katholische Kirche am Theater Unter den Linden, und es ist klar, dass sich viele Leute darüber aufgeregt haben.[23] Es muss daran erinnert werden, dass die Deutschen im Allgemeinen nichts von den gewaltigen Angriffen auf London wussten.

Unterhaltung im eigentlichen Sinne gab es nicht. Öffentliches Tanzen war verboten und die beste Entspannung waren dagegen Konzerte, Oper, seriöses Theater und die

23 This refers to the Sankt-Hedwigs-Kathedrale in Berlin, which was damaged during a British bombing raid carried out on the night of 1–2 March 1943.

vielleicht lustigste Show der damaligen Zeit, das Kabarett der Komiker. Für mich war die Begegnung mit der weltberühmten Pianistin und Beethoven-Interpretin Elly Ney[24] ein Erlebnis. Eine ältere weißhaarige Dame tritt auf und nichts Auffälliges dabei, aber schon bei den ersten Akkorden und während des ganzen Konzerts war nicht die geringste Spur von Niesen zu hören, wir saßen alle stumm da, man war in einer anderen Welt, niemand dachte an den Krieg und als sie fertig war, war es lange totenstill im Saal, bevor die Ovationen losbrachen. Eine gottbegnadete Person und eine der stärksten und schönsten Erinnerungen, die ich habe. Darüber hinaus Alfred Corteau[25] als Chopin-Interpret, Wilhelm Furtwängler[26] als Dirigent der Berliner Philharmoniker mit einer der großen Sinfonien oder Willie Domgraf-Fassbender[27] als Sänger in La Traviata. Nicht zu vergessen der geniale Österreicher Edvard Balzer[28] in einem Wintermärchen im Schillertheater. Einige der Filme waren auch erstklassig, und Zarah Leander[29] war unglaublich beliebt, und ich muss hier betonen, dass sie meines Wissens nie in einer der Propagandanummern von Dr. Goebbels mitgewirkt hat. Die Filme, in denen ich sie sah, passten perfekt zum deutschen Publikum, aber ich glaube kaum, dass sie in Schweden ein großer Erfolg gewesen wären. Ich traf sie einmal im Zusammenhang mit einem Empfang, den sie im Herbst 1942 für die siegreiche schwedische Fußballmannschaft gab. Mir fiel auf, dass sie stolz darauf war, Schwedin zu sein. Auch mit Kristina Söderbaum[30] kam ich später unter weniger angenehmen Umständen in Kontakt. Wie man weiß, stand sie, verheiratet mit dem Regisseur Harlan,[31] vor der Wahl, nach Schweden zurückzureisen und ihren Sohn in Deutschland zurückzulassen oder zu bleiben und ihren Sohn gehen zu lassen. Sie entschied sich zu bleiben, eine großartige Schauspielerin, aber nicht zuletzt eine großartige Frau, freundlich und hilfsbereit. Harlan hatte viele Kritiker, galt mehr oder weniger als Genie, wählte aber die falsche Seite.

Allmählich entstand der Kontakt zur schwedischen Victoriagemeinde. Dort trafen sich viele junge Leute, teils Praktikanten, teils Berliner, deren Mütter mit Deutschen verheiratete Schwedinnen waren. Pfarrer war damals Birger Forell,[32] später Pfarrer in Borås.[33] Wir waren eine Gruppe, die zusammenhielt, im Chor der Gemeinde

24 Elly Ney (1882–1968) – German pianist, a supporter of Hitler and a member of the NSDAP from 1937.

25 Alfred Cortot (1877–1962) – the son of a French father and a Swiss mother, pianist and conductor. During the Second World War, he collaborated with the Vichy authorities.

26 Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886–1954) – German conductor and composer.

27 Willie Domgraf-Fassbaender (1897–1978) – German opera singer (baritone).

28 Wesslén probably means Ewald Balser (1898–1978) – German-Austrian stage and film actor.

29 Zarah Leander (1907–1981) – Swedish actress and singer; see: Perwe J. 2018.

30 Kristina Söderbaum (1912–2001) – German actress Swedish origin; see: Perwe J. 2018, 334–336.

31 Veit Harlan (1899–1964) – actor and director of National Socialist propaganda films.

32 Birger Forell (1893–1958) – Swedish Lutheran clergyman; Sundeen J. 2018.

33 Borås – town in southern – Sweden.

und in verschiedenen Kontexten an Feiertagen und Festen mitwirkte. Leider habe ich Forell nicht oft gesehen, er wurde im Herbst 1942 durch den neuen Pfarrer Erik Perwe[34] abgelöst. Forell und seine Taten sind wohl allen gut bekannt und ihrer positiven Beurteilung kann hier nur beigepflichtet werden, seine Erinnerung lebt weiter und viele Berliner werden ihn nie vergessen.

Der neue Pfarrer sollte eingeführt werden und wir jungen Leute sollten mit Gesang dazu beitragen. Als Dirigenten hatten wir das Privileg, den Organisten der Storkyrkan in Stockholm,[35] Gotthard Arnér[36] zu gewinnen, der damals durch Deutschland reiste und auf alten Kirchenorgeln spielte, um seine soliden Kenntnisse weiter zu vertiefen. Außerdem verfügte der Chor über eine hervorragende Altstimme, Wendela Rudbäck, die in Berlin Gesang studierte. Erzbischof Erling Eidem[37] kam zur Feier und das Ganze wurde im Rundfunk gesendet. Es war ein denkwürdiges Ereignis, bei dem alles reibungslos lief, der Gesang, die Einsetzung, bei dem man deutsche evangelische Bischöfe sehen konnte, den alten Probst Sebardt, ehemaliger Hirt der Gemeinde, die Seemannspfarrer in Deutschland usw., die gesamte schwedische Mission mit Minister Arvid Richert[38] an der Spitze und die ganze schwedische Gemeinde. Die Gemeinde hatte einen neuen Hirten bekommen, der tragischerweise nur 2 Jahre im Amt blieb, eine neue Pfarrersfrau, die wir alle bewunderten und mochten. Die Leute sprechen manchmal von *Sag die Freude, die ewig währt!*[39] und hier kann wirklich gesagt werden, dass dieser Ausdruck gerechtfertigt ist, denn viele harte und schwere Schläge sollten unserer Victoria-Gemeinde in den kommenden Jahren widerfahren.

Bevor ich nach Deutschland abreiste, traf ich in Stockholm einen alten Freund aus Kindertagen, Wolf Lyberg,[40] damals Redakteur des Sportmagazins Idrottsbladet. Ich bekam einen Presseausweis und wurde gebeten, an „IB" zu schreiben, was so im deutschen Sport passierte. Schon damals war das Verhältnis zwischen dem Propagandaministerium in Berlin und dem „IB" in Stockholm angespannt. Torsten Tegnér[41] hat beileibe nicht geschwiegen, was er über Herrn Hitler dachte und ich war natürlich bereit, mich großen Schwierigkeiten zu stellen. Bis 1944 konnte man in Deutschland schwedische Zeitungen kaufen, ich konnte also die Entwicklung recht gut verfolgen und wusste, dass meine Jobmöglichkeiten an dieser Front jeden Tag zunichte gemacht

34 Erik Perwe (1905–1944) – pastor of the Swedish Victoria Congregation in Berlin in 1942–1944.

35 St. Nicholas Cathedral in Stockholm.

36 Gotthard Arnér (1913–2002) – Swedish organist, educator, and composer of organ and church music. He taught at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm.

37 Erling Eidem (1880–1972) – Swedish clergyman, Archbishop of Uppsala from 1932 to 1950 (Fig. 9).

38 Arvid Richert (1887–1981) – Swedish diplomat and civil servant. From 1937 to 1945, he served as Sweden's envoy in Berlin.

39 In Swedish: *Säg den glädje som varar beständigt!* = Tell of the joy that lasts forever!

40 Wolf Sigvard Lyberg (1917–2012) – Swedish sports journalist, sports administrator, and sports historian.

41 Torsten Tegnér (1888–1977) – athlete and journalist, owner of the sports magazine „Idrottsbladet".

werden konnten. Es lief auf ein großes Fußball-Länderspiel hinaus und laut deutscher Presse würden die Schweden im Berliner Olympiastadion schwer geschlagen werden. Kurz zuvor hatte ich die Erlaubnis erhalten, den Deutschen Auslandspresseklub zu besuchen, einen Klub für ausländische Journalisten, wo man gut essen und Zigaretten über die übliche, meist sehr magere Zuteilung hinaus kaufen konnte. Unter den Schweden, die ich dort traf, waren unter anderem Fredlund – „Svenska Dagbladet", Jäderlund[42] – „Stockholmstidningen", Westerlund[43] – „Dagens Nyheter" und Sandeberg[44] „Skandinavisches Telegrammbüro." Der Klub war sehr angenehm und man konnte von dort aus Berichte nach Stockholm telefonisch senden. Die größte Überraschung für mich war die deutsche Version des Fernsehens, die dort gezeigt wurde. Gebaut als großer Bodenempfänger mit liegender Bildfläche und einem Deckel mit Spiegel darin, damit man in der Ferne sitzen und sehen konnte. Das Bild überraschend klar. Gezeigt wurden wohl alte Filme.

Um in Stockholm anzurufen und Tickets für das Olympiastadion zu bekommen, war ich auf einen Protokollmanager im Propagandaministerium angewiesen. Es lief alles reibungslos und ich dachte nicht, dass es zu Komplikationen kommen würde. Am Donnerstag vor dem Länderspiel hatte ich einen Bericht geschickt und mitgeteilt, dass alles gut ging. Als ich spätabends im Klub ankam, wurde ich von einer Nachricht begrüßt, dass der Protokollchef mich sofort sprechen wolle. Ich ahnte, dass etwas Unangenehmes im Gange war und sehr richtig: Torsten Tegnér hatte in seiner letzten Ausgabe von „IB" eine schreckliche Salve gegen Herrn Hitler und seine Anhänger abgefeuert, mit der Folge, dass die Zeitung in Deutschland verboten und ich aufgefordert wurde, meine Verbindungen zu ihr sofort abzubrechen. Der Zutritt zum Auslandspresseclub wurde mir untersagt. Das war ein harter Schlag für mich, vielleicht vor allem, weil ich den Klub nicht besuchen und meine ansonsten eher magere Kost bereichern durfte, aber auch, weil ich über das Spiel nicht berichten konnte.

Ja, nun war guter Rat teuer und ich hatte mir im Innersten fest vorgenommen, dass sich das alles so oder so regeln ließe. Durch gute Freunde im Klub fand ich heraus, dass „Sydsvenska Dagbladet" einen Mann namens Söderbom(?),[45] der „Idrottsbladet" in Südschweden vertrat, herunterschicken würde. Ich habe ihn kontaktiert und er hat mir ein Ticket besorgt und mir zugleich versprochen, dass ich mit seiner Redaktion in Malmö sprechen könne, nachdem er seinen Bericht telefonisch eingereicht hätte und dass mein Bericht auf einer Platte aufgezeichnet und noch am selben Abend telefonisch nach Stockholm geschickt werden würde.

42 Christer Jäderlund (1901–1965) – journalist and sports correspondent.

43 Wesslén perhaps means Ivar Vesterlund – Swedish sports journalist, correspondent.

44 Edward Sandeberg (1914–1982) – Swedish sports journalist and war correspondent.

45 Question mark after the surname Söderbom added by Wesslén.

Als das Spiel im ausverkauften Olympiastadion mit 115.000 Zuschauern begann,[46] saß ich neben Söderbom auf der Pressetribüne und eine Minute später dachte ich, meine letzte Sekunde habe geschlagen, als der Protokollchef auftauchte und sich neben mich setzte. Kein Wort und ich konnte ruhig meine Notizen machen und nach dem Spiel runter in die Umkleidekabine der Deutschen gehen und die Spieler interviewen. Dann war das Reden mit den überglücklichen schwedischen Jungs das Schönste an einem großen Sportsonntag. Svenne Berka Bergqvist[47] hat mir in jeder Hinsicht geholfen, dass ich bei den Schweden gelandet bin, also habe ich genug Material für „IB" bekommen. Der Anruf in Malmö lief perfekt und am Montag hatte „IB" einen großen Bericht seines abgeordneten Mitarbeiters in Berlin.

Die Niederlage war eine herbe Enttäuschung für die Deutschen. Sie gaben allem die Schuld, vergaßen aber, dass Schweden schließlich die bessere Mannschaft war. Doch die Deutschen haben Schwierigkeiten, ihre Niederlagen offen einzugestehen, also die deutschen Nationalsozialisten.

Einige weitere Male besuchten schwedische Sportmannschaften Berlin, u.a. Gunder Hägg[48] und Arne Andersson[49] und einmal gab es ein Bankett für das schwedische Team und als „IB"-Reporter habe ich teils über die Wettkämpfe und teils über die anschließende Siegerehrung berichtet. Bo Lindman[50] fungierte als Teamleiter für die schwedische Gruppe, aber er hatte nicht viel für uns übrig und ich selbst wurde durch Lindmans Intervention vom Bankett ausgeschlossen. Bis heute kenne ich den direkten Grund dafür nicht.

Eine kleine lustige Episode aus meinem ersten Berlin-Aufenthalt ist vielleicht erwähnenswert. Während meiner Zeit bei Grille wohnte ich bei einem Dänen, Knud Hansen, der seit etwas mehr als 2 Jahren in Deutschland lebte und mir am Anfang eine große Hilfe war. Eines Sonntags schlug er vor, wir sollten in den Treptower Park gehen, Berlins Gröna Lund,[51] aber ungefähr viermal so groß. Natürlich landeten wir an einem Schießstand, um uns zu messen. Wir wählten den mit den tollsten Preisen, nicht weil wir mit einem großen Gewinn gerechnet hatten, sondern weil wir scharf aufs Schießen waren. Die Schießtafeln hatten 12 Ringe und der zwölfte war ungefähr so groß wie ein Cent und es wurden 3 Schüsse abgefeuert. Der erste Preis war eine Tischpendule, übrigens sehr schön. Nach einigen Runden mit 31 Punkten kamen 3 jüngere

46 The Germany–Sweden football match was played on 20 September 1942 and ended in a 2–3 victory for the visitors.

47 Sven Bergqvist (1914–1996) – Swedish footballer and ice hockey player who played as a goalkeeper. Wesslén uses his nickname here.

48 Gunder Hägg (1918–2004) – Swedish middle-distance runner. In the 1940s, one of the dominant middle- and long-distance runners, who set 16 world records between 1941 and 1945.

49 Arne Andersson (1917–2009) – Swedish athlete, middle-distance runner, with four world records.

50 Bo Lindman (1899–1992) – Swedish officer, sports administrator, and outstanding modern pentathlete and fencer, from 1934 to 1946, he headed the Swedish Sports Federation (*Svenska Idrottsförbundet*).

51 Gröna Lund – an amusement park in Stockholm.

Offiziere in Uniform und fragten, ob wir um die Wette schießen wollten, was prompt angenommen wurde. Ich selbst habe es geschafft, 34 Punkte zu erreichen, was keinem der anderen gelungen ist. So schossen wir eine Abschlussserie und als letzter Mann startete ich mit einer Zwölf und hatte das unvergleichliche Glück, bei meinem zweiten Schuss noch einen Volltreffer zu landen. Dann begann die Tragikomik. Die Besitzerin lud selbst nach und als ich meinen dritten Schuss abfeuerte, erklärte sie triumphierend: Bumm! Aber siehe da, das haben die deutschen Offiziere nicht geschluckt, stattdessen haben sie behauptet, dass sie nie eine Kugel hineingesteckt hat; ich selbst habe ein schlechtes Gehör und kann so etwas nicht hören. Die betreffende Dame musste nachladen und zu meinem großen Erstaunen gelang mir auch der dritte Volltreffer. Großer Jubel. Und stolz nahm ich den Preis entgegen. Die Deutschen schrieben ihre Namen auf die Rückseite der Tischpendule und Hansen erhielt ihn später als Hochzeitsgeschenk. Die Besitzerin hat versucht, mich zu überreden, sie an sie wieder zu verkaufen, ohne Erfolg. Nun war es so, dass die Läden hübsche Attrappen ausstellten, aber wenn man dann den Laden betrat, gab es meist nur noch leere Regale und es war schon 1942 für die Läden sehr schwierig, Waren zu bekommen. In Deutschland hatten alle Fabriken ihren Betrieb für den Militärdienst umgeändert.

Mein Praktikum bei Grille dauerte genau 1 Jahr. Im Frühjahr 1943 schickten die Engländer nachts Mosquito-Flugzeuge nach Berlin und diese brachten mehrfach Bomben mit. In der Regel waren es etwa 5 bis 10 Flugzeuge. Einmal wurden die Bomben über Weißensee abgeworfen und landeten direkt neben unserem Garten. Der Schaden war groß, da viel Glas zersplittert wurde, als die Bomben in einen angrenzenden Park fielen. Am nächsten Tag traf ich viele Kinder im Park, die in den Bombenkratern Krieg spielten. 8 bis10-Jährige, ausgestattet mit Spielzeuggewehren und Handgranatenattrappen, teilweise in HJ-Uniform, und das Spiel wurde vollkommen ernst genommen. Ich fragte einen der Jugendlichen, worum es in dem Spiel ging, und bekam die Antwort: „Hier verstecken sich einige englische Fallschirmjäger!“

Während eines Sportaustausches zwischen Schweden und Ungarn im Jahr 1942 machte die schwedische Mannschaft Station in Berlin, und einige Schweden nahmen an Wettkämpfen im Olympiastadion teil. Sven Jerring[52] sollte wohl mit ihnen nach Budapest fahren, aber aus irgendeinem Grund blieb er in Berlin, meiner Erinnerung nach hatte er sich eine schlimme Erkältung zugezogen.

1933[53] war ich einige Monate mit Lungenentzündung bettlägerig und schrieb dann, wie alle anderen Kinder in meiner Situation, an „Onkel Sven“. Meine Enttäuschung war groß, als ich hinterher hörte, dass mein Brief im Radio verlesen worden war, ohne dass ich Gelegenheit gehabt hatte, ihn zu hören. Ich habe Sven Jerring im Hotel Fürstenhof,

52 Sven Jerring (1895–1979) – Swedish commentator and presenter at the Swedish broadcasting company „Radiotjänst.“

53 In this passage, E. Wesslén recalls an episode from his childhood.

in dem er wohnte, aufgesucht, und es war ein fröhliches Treffen, und dann haben wir fast eine ganze Nacht über Briefkästen und Sporterinnerungen geredet.

Um meine Ausbildung zu ergänzen, verließ ich Grille im Frühjahr 1943 und begann in *Späths Gärtnerei*, der größten Europas. Leider war es nur für kurze Zeit, weil ich keine Arbeitserlaubnis bekommen hatte, um in meinem Beruf zu arbeiten. Alle Arbeitskräfte sollten nun der Kriegsindustrie zur Verfügung gestellt werden, und wenn ich bleiben wollte, blieb nichts anderes übrig als die Arbeit, die die Behörden zuwiesen. Persönliche Verpflichtungen führten jedoch dazu, dass ich blieb, abgesehen von einem 5-wöchigen Urlaub in Schweden im August.[54] In der letzten Zeit, in der ich einmal zu Hause war, gab es große Schwierigkeiten mit den Behörden bei der Aus- und Einreise, jedes Mal musste man ein Ausreisevisum beantragen, und die einzige Behörde, die darüber entscheiden konnte, war die Gestapo. Die Heimreise erfolgte das erste Mal mit dem Zug über Kopenhagen, wo ich auch übernachtete. Ich war froh, in diese Stadt zu kommen, wo ich noch nie zuvor gewesen war. Im Hotel Kong Frederik war ein Zimmer reserviert worden und ich freute mich im Vorfeld sehr über den dänischen Tisch, doch man braucht meine Enttäuschung wohl nicht zu erraten, als der Portier mitteilte, dass um 20 Uhr Sperrstunde sei und keine Restaurants geöffnet seien. Kopenhagen war im Vergleich zu Berlin eine düstere Stadt, vom dänischen Gemüt war nichts zu vernehmen. Sie haben mich sogar als Schweden schief angesehen. Von der berühmten dänischen Tafel war nichts zu bemerken und auch das Frühstück am nächsten Tag war sehr spartanisch.

Generell kann man sagen, dass das erste Jahr in Deutschland relativ ruhig war. Ich war hauptsächlich mit meiner Arbeit beschäftigt und noch nicht mit den Dingen in Berührung gekommen, die in den Jahren 1944 und 1945 eine dominierende Rolle in meinen Erfahrungen spielen sollten. Über das Judenproblem hatte man entfernt gehört, der Judenstern war an manchen Menschen zu sehen, Konzentrationslager, ja, die Deutschen selbst leugneten, dass es sie gab. Gestapo war ein Begriff, man hörte natürlich von Interventionen gegen den Einzelnen, aber ich für meinen Teil konnte nichts Auffälliges bemerken. Andererseits konnte ich feststellen, dass sowohl Goebbels als auch Hitler in ihren großen Reden an das deutsche Volk den Ton verschärft hatten und man kaum mit süßen Brottagen rechnen konnte.

Die Rückkehr nach Berlin im Herbst 1943 war bedingt durch den Wunsch, etwas für die Menschen zu tun, die mir so viel Freundlichkeit und Wohlwollen entgegengebracht und mir viel bedeutet hatten. Hinter der Entscheidung zur Rückkehr stand also keine Sensationsgier. Während meines Aufenthalts in Schweden erhielt ich einige Nachrichten aus Berlin, beide trauriger Natur, aber ich dachte, ich könnte dort unten etwas bewirken.

54 It was probably a honeymoon, as Wesslén had married Karin Hirschberg, who was half-Swedish, in Berlin on 31 July 1943.

Das Wiedersehen mit Berlin war nicht das, was ich erwartet hatte, einige Luftangriffe hatten bereits ihre Spuren hinterlassen und es war immer deutlicher zu spüren, dass der Krieg Berlin näher rückte. Erik Perwe war so freundlich wie immer. Er hat mich in Tempelhof abgeholt und mir ein bisschen erzählt, was passiert ist. Ein großes Problem war dadurch entstanden, dass der Gemeindesekretär eine Frist von einem Monat erhalten hatte, um Berlin und Deutschland zu verlassen. Dies bedeutete einen großen Verlust für die Gemeinde, denn Allan Montgomery war in der schwedischen Kolonie ein sehr beliebter Mann geworden. Ein ausgezeichneter Pianist und eine Person, mit der man leicht auskam. Ich glaube nicht, dass irgendjemand ein schlechtes Wort über ihn verloren hat. Perwe suchte nun nach einem Ersatz, konnte aber niemanden finden und bat mich in seiner Not, Montgomery als Sekretär zu ersetzen. Da es kaum möglich wäre, jemanden aus Schweden zu bekommen, versprach ich Perwe, zu bleiben.

Die Arbeit in der Gemeinde war größtenteils eingestellt, die Schule geschlossen, die Familie des Hausmeisters nach Schweden gezogen und die Gottesdienste wurden nun die einzigen Gelegenheiten, dass die Gemeindemitglieder sich treffen konnten. Perwe hatte viel zu erledigen, die Flüchtlingsprobleme begannen sich zu häufen und unsere jüdischen Freunde waren in ein düsteres Klima geraten. Vor einigen Jahren war an manchen Stellen noch der Davidstern zu sehen, jetzt waren die meisten verschwunden und ein kleiner Teil lebte versteckt. Einige Schweden mit Familien und in Schweden geborene Ehefrauen begannen, nach Berlin zu kommen, teils weil ihre Wohnungen anderswo zerstört worden waren, teils weil die Russen von allen Seiten eindrangen. Hilfreich waren vor allem die Lebensmittelpakete, die der Verband der Auslandsschweden in Stockholm fast monatlich verschickte. Das bedeutete eine gute Ergänzung zu der mageren Rationierung.

Im November desselben Jahres begannen die schweren Luftangriffe auf Berlin. Wir hatten im Keller einen kleinen Bunker gebaut und im Raum über dem Keller eine 1,5 Meter dicke Schicht mit armiertem Beton verlegt. Wir hatten provisorische Betten besorgt, hatten ein Radio, das von unseren guten Freunden, der Bezirkspolizei gegenüber, meistens gehört wurde, wenn die BBC Nachrichten aus London sendete.[55] Die schwedische Gesandtschaft hatte im Jahr zuvor ihren Bunker fertiggestellt, der rund zehn Personen für längere Zeit Unterschlupf bieten konnte. Wir waren oft dort, wenn Fliegeralarm kam. Durch die Suche nach einem bestimmten Sender im Radio konnten wir die sogenannte „Luftlagemeldung", die Meldestelle der Luftverteidigung, empfangen und sie informierte uns über die Fluglage über dem Land. Die Militärbehörden hatten eine in Quadrate unterteilte Deutschlandkarte ausgegeben, wobei jedem Quadrat Buchstaben und Zahlen zugeordnet waren, damit man die Meldung der Meldestelle an alle Flugkontrollposten leicht verfolgen konnte. Eine solche Karte hatten wir uns natürlich besorgt, und sie erwies sich als unentbehrlich, wenn man in den Keller

55 See: Westberg L. 2003, 200–205.

ging und die Meldezentrale abhörte und feindliche Flugzeuge über deutschem Luftraum waren, konnte man bald feststellen, ob Berlin angegriffen werden würde. Wir haben nach einer „schlechten" Nachricht mit einem Spielraum von etwa 30 Minuten gerechnet, und es traf immer zu.

Die Luftangriffe kulminierten Ende November [1943]. Um 20 Uhr an einem regnerischen Abend mit tiefen Wolken war ich mit ein paar Freunden in einem gemütlichen Weinrestaurant, als der Luftangriffsalarm losging. Keiner von uns glaubte an einen Angriff und wir blieben dort. Welle um Welle donnerten die Bomber unter den Wolken über Berlin und warfen Mengen von Brandbomben ab. In dem Haus, in dem wir uns befanden, konnten wir vom Dachboden aus die Feuer in der ganzen Stadt sehen, wir waren von drei Seiten von Feuer umgeben. Wegen des Rauchs und der Hitze war es fast unmöglich, durch die Straßen zu kommen. Etwa eine Stunde später kam der eigentliche Schlag, als ein weiterer Alarm losging und wir uns hastig auf den Flugabwehrkeller zubewegten, denn es konnte kaum Zweifel daran bestehen, dass jetzt schwerere Dinge fallen würden. So kam es, und es war nicht wenig, was fiel. Das ganze westliche Berlin war wie ein Feuermeer, es war unmöglich, mit dem Auto zu fahren, da überall tiefe Krater waren. Nach einigen Stunden gelang es mir, die Kirche zu erreichen, die keinen Schaden genommen hatte und ich ging weiter in Richtung der Gesandtschaft, als ich einen ihrer Beamten traf, der mir sagte, dass das Gesandtschaftsgebäude niedergebrannt sei. Alle in Berlin lebenden schwedischen Diplomaten wurden ausgebombt, und meine Wohnung in der Landgrafenstraße traf das gleiche Schicksal. Man könnte hier von „Dantes Inferno" sprechen. Am nächsten Tag kehrten die Piloten mit Sprengbomben zurück und hatten keine Schwierigkeiten, sich zurechtzufinden, da die Brände noch nicht gelöscht waren. Die Verwüstung im Westen Berlins war enorm, Viertel um Viertel komplett ausgebrannt und hier und da klafften nach Sprengbomben große Lücken in den Häuserzeilen. Seltsamerweise nahmen die Berliner das alles mit stoischer Gelassenheit hin, aber das war nur ein Vorgeschmack auf das, was noch kommen sollte.

In der Kirche bekamen wir immer mehr zu tun, viele Mitglieder der Kolonie waren obdachlos geworden, das Schwedenheim, Altersheim für unsere alten Leute, war in der Gefahrenzone. Nun bot Gräfin Eickstedt[56] an, auf ihrem Schloss Hohenholz bei Stettin einen Flügel zur Verfügung zu stellen, der nach den Wünschen von Pfarrer Perwe verwendet werden sollte, und er veranlasste die Verlegung des gesamten Schwedenheims nach Hohenholz.

Gräfin Eickstedt wurde als Malmöerin geboren und hat alles dafür getan, dass sich unsere alten Leute wohlfühlten, und es war eine gute Unterstützung für unsere Heimleiterin Fräulein Malm. Perwe und ich wurden auch sehr gut betreut, als wir ab und zu zu Besuch kamen.

56 Majlis von Eickstedt-Peterswaldt (1919–2010) – Swedish actress born in Malmö, wife of Vivigenz Ernst Graf von Eickstedt-Peterswaldt.

Wir hatten große Freude an Gösta Lundin,[57] dem Sekretär und Leiter der Kriegsgefangenenhilfe, der uns oft besuchte und dann einige Zeit blieb. Deren Aufgaben bestanden darin, die verschiedenen Kriegsgefangenenlager zu besuchen und den Gefangenen nach besten Kräften zu helfen. Vielleicht konnte nicht viel erreicht werden, außer dass ihre Besuche sowohl beliebt als auch lang erwartet waren. Gösta Lundin war oft unser Gast und galt mehr oder weniger als einer von uns. Eine brillante Großzügigkeit und Hilfsbereitschaft zeichneten diese Persönlichkeit aus, ein eloquenter Redner, der ohne Skript in unserer Kirche predigte, als Perwe aus irgendeinem Grund verhindert war. Wir schulden ihm großen Dank, nicht zuletzt für seine Beteiligung an der Evakuierung des Schwedenheims und der Überführung unserer schwedischen und deutschen Gemeindemitglieder nach Lübeck.

Im Frühjahr 1944 schlugen mehrmals mittelschwere Sprengbomben im Park der Kirche ein und richteten erhebliche Schäden an. Indem wir reichlich Geld für Kaffee und Tabak ausgaben, gelang es uns, qualifizierte Leute für die Reparaturen zu gewinnen.

Das jüdische Problem war eine äußerst ernste Angelegenheit, in der Perwe vielleicht seinen größten Beitrag leistete. Er behauptete, dass das Grundstück der schwedischen Kirche in der Landhausstraße ohne seine Erlaubnis von den Behörden nicht betreten werden könnte, da er diplomatische Immunität genieße, was möglicherweise nicht ganz richtig gewesen ist, da dies wohl nur für sein persönliches Stockwerk galt. Fast immer hatten wir Juden, die sich bei uns versteckten und es würde mich wundern, wenn die Gestapo nichts davon gewusst haben sollte. Bei einigen Gelegenheiten teilte uns der Kommissar unserer Polizeiwache mit, dass die Gestapo einen Mann schicken werde, der uns einige Tage überwachen würde. Diese Überwachungen waren nicht sehr gescheit, ein Mann saß an einem Fenster im zweiten Stock und beobachtete uns mit einem Fernglas (Fig. 10). 1942 konnten die Juden noch bestimmte Berufe ausüben und die Ärzte konnten sie betreuen. Ich selbst suchte im Herbst 1942 einen Ohrenarzt Dr. Schwerin auf. Er hatte große Angst, mich zu behandeln, da ich kein Semit war und dies bedeuten könnte, dass ihm die Erlaubnis entzogen und er in ein Konzentrationslager gebracht würde. Für die Halbjuden, Mischlinge ersten Grades, war die Situation noch erträglich, aber im Winter 1945 begann man, sie beispielsweise in die Salzbergwerke zu schicken und ihren jeweiligen Ehepartnern wurden ziemlich erniedrigende Arbeiten zugewiesen, obwohl sie „Arier" waren.

Irgendwann im Sommer 1944 besuchte uns ein Mann, der sich Dr. Schmidt nannte und der zu der Zeit sehr krank war, aber trotz Lebensgefahr über seine Probleme sprechen und Hilfe holen wollte.[58] Er erzählte, er sei Leiter einer Blindenanstalt

57 Gösta Lundin (1897–1966), Swedish educator and Christian and school administrator. From 1944, he was in charge in Germany of the World Alliance of YMCAs' assistance to prisoners of war. He was in Berlin from 29 August 1944.

58 It concerns Otto Weidt (1883–1947) – for more see: Ekdahl S. 2024, as well as Perwe J. 2018, 164–165, 325, and *Infoblatt Otto Weidt* (Fig. 11).

in Berlin, die ausschließlich Kriegsblinde aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg aufnahm, was eine glatte Lüge war, keiner der Insassen war wirklich blind und alle waren sie Juden. Die Anstalt stellte Bürsten her, die in verschiedene Konzentrationslager geliefert wurden, zu denen Dr. Schmidt in regelmäßigen Abständen reiste, um Bestellungen abzuholen. Doktor Schmidt trug eine dicke Brille und hatte offiziell ein sehr schlechtes Sehvermögen, aber es war gut genug, um sich ein Bild von den Zuständen in den von ihm besuchten Lagern zu machen. Jetzt war er von einem Besuch in Birkenau zurückgekehrt, das seiner Meinung nach das schrecklichste Lager in Großdeutschland war. Bei einem seiner Besuche dort im Winter 43/44 war er unter anderem Augenzeuge von Folgendem geworden: Auf dem Lagerhof wurden die Insassen am frühen Morgen zu sehr anstrengenden körperlichen Übungen gezwungen. Denjenigen, die es aus irgendeinem Grund nicht ertragen konnten, wurde das Stehen befohlen, und die Wachen gossen Eimer mit Wasser auf ihre baren Oberkörper, wonach die Opfer gezwungen waren, mehrere Stunden in der Kälte zu bleiben. In jeder Baracke wurde ein Beobachter eingesetzt, der unter Androhung von Strafe alles Geschehene melden musste. Schmidt erhielt vom Lagerkommandanten ein Angebot, prima Seife zu kaufen. Wie es zu dieser Herstellung gekommen war, braucht hier kaum erzählt zu werden. Auch Versuche mit dem Einspritzen von Benzin und dem Entfernen von Genitalien gehörten zu den Ereignissen in Birkenau.

Doktor Schmidt wollte teils das von ihm niedergeschriebene Material über seine Beobachtungen zur Weiterleitung an das Rote Kreuz in Genf übergeben, teils versuchen, Hilfe bei der Weiterführung seines Instituts bekommen. Soweit es uns möglich war, erhielt Schmidt Lebensmittel und geeignete Waren für Bestechungs- und Tauschgeschäfte. Leider endete unser Kontakt zu ihm plötzlich, wahrscheinlich ist er an seiner Krankheit gestorben und er hat nie eine Adresse des Instituts hinterlassen oder sich nicht getraut. Bei späteren Kontakten mit anderen Personen wurden Schmidts Angaben voll bestätigt.

Unsere Hilfstätigkeit für die Juden basierte bis auf wenige Ausnahmen auf Nahrung, Geld, Kleidung und Waren zum Tausch. Erst kurz vor Kriegsende nahm unsere Hilfe einen anderen Charakter an.

Erik Perwe und die Schwedische Kirche

Die schwedische Kirche wurde während der Kriegsjahre immer mehr zu einem Sammelpunkt für die Schweden in Berlin.[59] Eine dominierende Figur in den Gemeindeaktivitäten war Pfarrer Erik Perwe, der 1942 die Nachfolge von Birger Forell antrat. Ein furchtloser Mann, vor dem alle den größten Respekt hatten und der in hohem Maße das Ohr des schwedischen Botschafters hatte. Er nahm seine Familie, seine

59 As for the persons mentioned in the *Kriegserinnerungen*, see Ekdahl S. (ed.), 2023, and in Perwe J. 2018.

Frau und seine 4 Töchter mit nach Berlin, musste sie aber im Sommer 1944 wegen des zunehmenden Bombardements nach Hause nach Schweden schicken, was wir alle bedauerten, da wir die große und großzügige Gastfreundschaft von Frau Perwe vermissten. Für jeden, der das Pfarrhaus besuchte, war es wie nach Hause zu kommen zu seiner eigenen Familie, es gab immer eine Tasse Kaffee, und immer nahm sich jemand Zeit, mit den Besuchern zu sprechen. Erik Perwe war wohl kein Redner im eigentlichen Sinne, und ich erinnere mich an seine Qual an Freitagnachmittagen, wenn er üblicherweise die Sonntagspredigt niederschrieb, es dauerte Stunden, Stunden produktiver Zeit, die für andere Zwecke hätten genutzt werden können, und doch hatte man viel Nutzen von seinen Predigten, die seine eigenen Probleme interpretierten, während er gleichzeitig in Gedanken und Offenheit immer mehr seinem dänischen Kollegen Kaj Munk[60] ähnelte. Wer erinnert sich nicht an das fröhliche Lachen und die fröhliche Stimmung, die herrschte, als Perwe aus Munks Predigten in seinem Büro vorlas; denjenigen, die Munk nicht kennen, kann ich sagen, dass er sehr offenherzig war, Gleichnisse verwendete, die vor Lachen zu Tränen rührten, und scharf und nachdrücklich die deutschen Besatzungsbehörden in Dänemark kritisierten. Sein tragischer Tod zeugt von der Brutalität der Gestapo und der Unfähigkeit der Besatzungstruppen, das dänische Volk zu verstehen. Wie sein Vorgänger war auch Perwe ein uneingeschränkter Befürworter von Hilfsaktionen in allen Formen, und besonders die Judenfrage lag ihm am Herzen. Er hegte die größte Abscheu vor den Nazis, was er keineswegs verschwieg. Seine Begegnungen mit Regierungsbeamten waren oft bitter, wo er offen seine Ansichten darlegte, ohne seine Antipathie zu verbergen. Vor allem die Gestapo hielt ihn im Blick, aber das hinderte ihn nicht, zu einigen Berichterstattern in der Gestapo-Zentrale Beziehungen zu unterhalten, die ihn gegen entsprechende Schmiergelder über kommende Aktionen gegen die Juden auf dem Laufenden hielten. Gösta Lundin und sein Kriegsgefangenensekretär, die uns in regelmäßigen Abständen besuchten, trugen zum guten Zusammenhalt innerhalb des Pfarrhauses bei. Lundin gehörte nicht der Staatskirche an, stand Perwe aber sehr nahe, vertrat ihn mehrfach auf der Kanzel und trug in vielerlei Hinsicht dazu bei, uns die Arbeit zu erleichtern.

Der Verband der Auslandsschweden in Stockholm leistete einen großen Beitrag, indem er jeden Monat Lebensmittelpakete an unsere Gemeindemitglieder schickte, als die Ernährungssituation in Berlin prekär wurde, was eine äußerst wertvolle Ergänzung der sonst so kargen Kost darstellte. Es war eine großartige Initiative und viele Gemeindemitglieder haben allen Grund, der Herren Swedelius, Malmqvist und Strömvall mit großer Dankbarkeit zu gedenken. Auch die nach Schweden heimkehrenden und manchmal ausgebombten Schweden wurden vom Verband der Auslandsschweden gut betreut.

60 Kaj Munk (1898–1944) – Danish pastor, theologian and opponent of National Socialism, murdered by SS officers on 4 January 1944.

1944 war für die Kirche alles andere als ein friedliches Jahr. Bei mehreren schweren Bombardierungen wurde die Kirche beschädigt, ein paar Mal gab es einen Brand, der schnell gelöscht werden konnte, aber die Schäden durch Sprengbomben, die in den Park der Kirche fielen, bereiteten uns große Sorgen, da Arbeitskräfte nicht verfügbar und die Reparaturen zeitaufwändig waren. Der Flüchtlingsstrom nahm zu und die Probleme wurden immer größer. Außerdem hatte Perwe ein schweres Nierenleiden, das ihn zwang, einige Zeit in einem Krankenhaus in Dresden zu verbringen. Im Herbst begannen unsere Vorräte bedenklich zu schrumpfen, und Perwe entschied dann, im November nach Stockholm zu fliegen, um Kleidung und Geld für die Gemeinde zu sammeln. Eines frühen Morgens verabschiedeten wir uns voneinander, ich selbst war am Tag zuvor von einem mehrtägigen Aufenthalt in Stockholm zurückgekehrt und ziemlich müde, aber ein Gedanke kam auf, und ich erinnerte mich an einige Träume, die ich etwa einen Monat zuvor gehabt hatte, aber die Müdigkeit überkam mich und führte mich wieder in die Bettposition, jedoch ohne dass Schlaf eintrat. Um etwa 11:30 Uhr rief ein Beamter der Gesandtschaft, Lars Åkerberg, an und erzählte, dass Tempelhof den Funkkontakt zu der Maschine verloren habe, in der Perwe reiste; er würde etwas später anrufen und eine Nachricht hinterlassen. Voller böser Vorahnungen unterrichtete ich Schwester Vide und Mery Siöcrona[61] von dem Anruf und eine trübe Stimmung machte sich breit. Pfarrer Sven Hellqvist,[62] der Rote-Kreuz-Abgesandte in Polen, besuchte uns für ein paar Tage und war derjenige, der sich an diesem schrecklichen Tag um uns kümmerte, denn je länger sich der Tag hinzog, desto mehr wurde uns klar, dass die Gemeinde ihren Hirten und wir außerdem mehr als einen Freund verloren hatten. Um 19 Uhr hielt Hellqvist einen kurzen Abendgottesdienst ab, sprach Worte des Gedenkens und forderte uns auf, so weiterzumachen, als ob Erik Perwe noch bei uns wäre. Das Flugzeug mit Perwe hatte nie Kontakt mit der schwedischen Funkstation aufgenommen, war aber außerhalb von Falsterbo[63] beobachtet worden. Einige Leute hatten eine Explosion gehört und meinten, sie hätten ein brennendes Objekt gesehen.[64]

Später am Abend saß ich mit Hellqvist zusammen und sprach darüber, was zu tun wäre. Perwe sollte ja Essen und Kleidung für die Gemeinde sammeln und die Frage war nun, wie wir das alles organisieren würden. Hellqvist versprach, schon am nächsten Tag mit dem Botschafter zu sprechen.

Während wir uns unterhielten, dachte ich an meine Träume und erzählte sie Hellqvist. In dem Ersten stand ich neben dem Altarring in einer Kirche, die ich nicht kannte,

61 Vide Ohmann, who was a parish nurse, and Meri Siöcrona, the head of the household of the Swedish Victoria Congregation.

62 Sven Hellqvist, a Swedish pastor associated with the Swedish Seamen's Mission (*Svenska Sjömanskyrkan*) in Danzig (Gdańsk).

63 Falsterbo – a locality in southern Sweden, 30 km south of Malmö.

64 A detailed account of the circumstances can be found in Perwe J. 2018, 265–280, with notes on pages 392–393.

es gab viele weiße Blumen und ein älterer Pfarrer mit einem großen gelben Kreuz auf der Brust hielt einen Gedenkgottesdienst für Erik Perwe. Dann änderte sich das Bild und ich befand mich wieder in der schwedischen Kirche, in ihrem Kirchensaal, wo ein Gedenkgottesdienst für Perwe abgehalten wurde. Es gab unglaublich viele Blumen, aber auch dort keinen Sarg. Im zweiten Traum befand ich mich in einer Kapelle und verabschiedete mich von Perwe an seinem Sarg. Es war merkwürdig, dass ich erst im Dezember 1944 in Norrköping[65] anwesend war, als der damalige Bischof in der Hedwigskirche, wo der Altarring mit weißen Chrysanthemen geschmückt war, eine Gedenkrede für Perwe hielt. Wenige Wochen später fand die Gedenkfeier in der schwedischen Kirche in Berlin statt, wo wir den Ort vor dem Altar mit einer Vielzahl von weißen Blumen dekoriert hatten. Ende Juni 1945, als ich wieder in Schweden war, rief mich der Kirchenwart unserer alten Gemeinde, Bjarne Kullgren, an, erzählte, dass Perwes Beerdigung ein paar Tage später in Malmö stattfinden würde und bat mich, dorthin zu reisen. So wurde der dritte Teil meiner Träume wahr und ich musste mich von meinem ehemaligen Chef und Freund Erik Perwe an seinem Sarg verabschieden.

Nach ein paar hektischen Tagen und Diskussionen, meiner Erinnerung nach zwischen Gösta Lundin, Sven Hellqvist und dem Botschafter, wurde beschlossen, dass Mery Siöcrona und ich nach Stockholm reisen sollten, um das zu vollenden, was Perwe vorhatte, nämlich Kleidung, Lebensmittel und Geld für die Gemeinde zu sammeln. Inzwischen war Erik Myrgren,[66] Seemannspfarrer in Stettin, zum Interimspfarrer der schwedischen Victoria-Gemeinde in Berlin und zum Gesandtschaftspfarrer ernannt worden, eine Wahl, die wir sehr zu schätzen wussten und für die wir sehr dankbar waren. Myrgren war sehr beliebt, auch ein ausgezeichneter Prediger (Fig. 13).

Wir wurden mit einem offiziellen, von Botschafter Richert unterschriebenen Bettelbrief ausgestattet und flogen dann sofort nach Stockholm, um dann weiter nach Uppsala zum Besuch bei Erzbischof Erling Eidem, der uns erwartete, zu fahren. Die Begegnung mit Erling Eidem war ein Erlebnis, das sich in mein Gedächtnis eingebrannt hat. Er war ein wunderbarer und verständnisvoller Mensch, er strahlte eine enorme Kraft aus und inspirierte uns für unsere Einsammlung für die Gemeinde. Was mich vielleicht am meisten beeindruckte, war seine Demut. Nicht ohne die Tatsache, dass ich mich an die Trauerrede erinnere, die er vor ein paar Jahren (1961) bei der Beerdigung von Dag Hammarskjöld[67] hielt und die Aftonbladet am nächsten Tag kommentierte: „Gibt es jemanden, der Gott näher steht als Erling Eidem?“

65 Norrköping – a city in southeastern Sweden, approximately 160 km southwest of Stockholm. The family of Erik Perwe lived in Norrköping.

66 Erik Myrgren (1914–1996) – Swedish seamen's pastor in Stettin, pastor of the Swedish Victoria Congregation in Berlin after Erik Perwe had died.

67 Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) – Swedish politician and diplomat, Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Mit Eidems Unterschrift auf unseren Bettelbriefen begannen wir unser Spendensammeln in Stockholm und das Ergebnis übertraf unsere Erwartungen. Ragnar Sachs von N[ordiska] K[ompaniet] steuerte eine große Summe Bargeld und viele Waren bei. Als ich dann Albin Johansson von der Konsum-Genossenschaft ans Telefon bekam, konnte ich nicht umhin zu erwähnen, was Sachs geschenkt hatte. Es führte dazu, dass er das Geschenk, das wir von NK erhalten hatten, sofort verdoppelte, ein großzügiges Geschenk, für das wir herzlich dankten. Eine echte Hilfe erhielten wir durch Gräfin Ebba Bonde, die selbst viel für uns erbeten hat. Als ich sie anrief, wurde ich gebeten, am Nachmittag zu ihrem Empfang zu kommen und traf dort unter anderem Außenminister Christian Günther und den schwedischen Minister in Kopenhagen, Dardel.[68] Hätten wir Ebba Bonde von Berlin aus über unsere Probleme geschrieben, so bin ich überzeugt, dass wir hätten hinfahren müssen, denn sie arrangierte und bemühte sich, besorgte Weihnachtsschinken von ihrem Metzger; was diese Frau nicht arrangieren konnte, würde ich gerne wissen.

Ein kleines Intermezzo ist vielleicht der Erinnerung wert, es fand in der Metzgerei von Ebba Bonde in Hötorgshallen[69] statt. Durch das Außenministerium hatte ich ein Kontingent von Schweinefleischmarken erhalten, die 7 Weihnachtsschinken entsprachen; sechs davon hatten wir bereits in unseren Eisenbahnwaggon gepackt und den 7. wollte ich mit dem Flugzeug mitnehmen, denn es war beabsichtigt, ihn zur schwedischen Kirche zu bringen. Ich wurde von Eric Engberg, dem Metzger, in der Heumarkthalle empfangen, der mich in sein kleines Büro zu Kaffee und Schnitten einlud. Es waren viele Leute in der Halle, Weihnachten stand vor der Tür und es schien, dass die Leute viele Fleisch- und Schweinefleischmarken hatten. Ich hatte zuvor Engberg meine Lizenz vom Auswärtigen Amt übergeben, und als ich mich nun auf den Weg machen wollte und den Weihnachtsschinken fein säuberlich in einer Tasche verpackt erhalten hatte, stoppte mich jemand mit einer Armbewegung von hinten – ein kaum 20-jähriges blondes Mädchen, wie ich sah – und sagt: „Ich verbiete Ihnen, von hier wegzugehen!“, während sie in der Menge der vorbeigehenden Menschen jemanden zu suchen schien. Ich kam nicht dazu, zu protestieren, weil ich es lächerlich fand, aber kurz darauf kam ein gutaussehender und gepflegter Mann auf uns zu, zeigte mir seine Polizeimarke und bat mich, mit ihm nach draußen zu kommen, damit es nicht zu viel Aufmerksamkeit erregen sollte. Ich wies darauf hin, dass draußen ein Taxi auf mich wartete, in das wir einsteigen könnten. Als wir uns niederließen, lauteten die Worte von seiner Seite in etwa so: „Nun, es gibt nichts zu besprechen, Sie haben einen Schinken ohne Coupons gekauft, aber es besteht keine Gefahr für Sie, denn es ist der Metzger, den wir belangen wollen und uns interessiert

68 Gustaf von Dardel (1882–1974) – Swedish diplomat, from 1941 to 1949 he served as Sweden's envoy in Copenhagen.

69 Hötorgshallen – market hall in central Stockholm.

am meisten, ob das Schweinefleisch gestempelt ist". Also wurde der Schinken ausgepackt, der sich als legal gestempelt herausstellte, und dann wurde das Notizbuch hervorgeholt und es folgten die üblichen Fragen nach Name, Alter, Wohnort usw. usw. Ich war überrumpelt und kam nicht dazu, ihm den wahren Sachverhalt zu erzählen. Als er dann den Wunsch äußerte, dass ich mich ausweise, holte ich meinen großen Außenministeriumspass hervor und sagte, dass es bei Engberg eine Lizenz für 7 Schinken gäbe. Die Reaktion ließ nicht lange auf sich warten, es folgten Entschuldigungen nach Entschuldigungen, er wollte das Taxi bezahlen usw. und dann erzählte er, dass es ihre Aufgabe war, illegale Fleischpartien zu ermitteln und alle Metzger in der Halle zu untersuchen. Den Einsatz von Ködern in Form von „Fleischsirenen" hielt er für richtig. Wir trennten uns unter äußerst höflichen Formen, Entschuldigungen usw.

Es gab einige anstrengende Tage mit Ausflügen, unter anderem nach Norrköping, um der emotionalen Trauerfeier für Erik Perwe beizuwohnen. Eine bewegende Feier, bei der sich Märta Perwe[70] aufrecht und ruhig von der Menge abhob, während viele von uns die Tränen nicht zurückhalten konnten (Fig. 12). Allein gelassen zu werden mit vier minderjährigen Kindern und sich trotzdem beherrschen zu können, ist mehr, als die meisten von uns geschafft hätten.

Die Rückkehr nach Berlin war sehr anstrengend, aber das Wissen, dass wir versucht hatten, eine Arbeit im Geiste von Perwe in Schweden zu leisten, half einigermaßen und die Dankbarkeit unserer Gemeindemitglieder für all die Weihnachtsgeschenke ließ uns spüren, dass das, was wir so weit wie möglich erledigt hatten, mit großer Dankbarkeit angenommen wurde.

Maria Gräfin von Maltzan, die „Rote Nelke" in Berlin

Die Französische Revolution hatte ihren Pimpernel Smith, eine von Baroness Orzky romantisierte Märchenfigur, der englische Film erfand einen Pimpernel Smith während des Krieges, aber die echte „rote Nelke" gab es in Berlin, den meisten unbekannt, die Hoffnung der Juden und ein Dorn im Auge der Gestapo, Gräfin Maltzan,[71] Tierärztin und ca. 40 bis 45 Jahre alt (Fig. 14). Ihr Schwager war der bekannte und berüchtigte Generalfeldmarschall von Reichenau, der selbst Hitlers Intrigen zum Opfer fiel. Aber trotz ihrer Verbindungen zum deutschen Hochadel und anderen höheren Würdenträgern blieb sie die unbekannte Tierärztin, die Tierkliniken besuchte, bei Hausbesuchen Hunde behandelte, wie sie sich so ironisch äußerte, wenn sie nach ihrer Arbeit gefragt wurde. Diese dunkle, hagere Frau mittleren Alters erschien eines Tages im Jahr 1944 bei Erik Perwe in der schwedischen Kirche, um über Allgemeines zu sprechen und das Terrain zu sondieren,

70 Märtha Perwe, née Werkström (1901–1979) – wife of Erik Perwe.

71 Maria von Maltzan (1909–1997) – veterinarian and biologist. During the Second World War, she helped save 60 Jews, for which she was honoured with the title of Righteous Among the Nations in 1987. See, among others, Ekdahl S. 2024, 135–137, 144–145.

ob wir zuverlässig waren und ob sie mit Hilfe rechnen konnte, d.h. sie bat damals um nichts, deutete aber an, dass die Situation im weiteren Verlauf schwierig sein würde. Sie war eine faszinierende Frau, voller Vitalität und mit einem glühenden Interesse für die Belange der Juden. In ihrer Wohnung in der Nähe des Kaiserplatzes beherbergte sie stets 8–10 jüdische Personen, Menschen, die ohne ihre Hilfe nie eine Chance gehabt hätten, durchs Leben zu kommen. Ich selbst habe viele von ihnen kennengelernt, die meisten mit intellektuellen Berufen, aber ohne die Möglichkeit, sich selbst zu ernähren. In erster Linie haben wir der Gräfin finanziell geholfen, und im Übrigen brauchte sie sich nur zu Wort zu melden und sie bekam, was sie wollte. Sie hatte die Wohnung durch eine Schiebewand geteilt, die immer geschlossen wurde, wenn jemand an der Tür klingelte, und wenn man die Wohnung betrat, gab es keine Möglichkeit, beim bloßen Anblick zu sehen, dass sich etwas geändert hatte. Leider kam es immer wieder vor, dass bei Spaziergängen im Sommer 1944 einige dieser Personen Pech hatten und manche versuchten, Berlin zu verlassen, um in die Schweiz oder nach Schweden zu gehen, aber allzu oft endeten diese Versuche in Tragödien. Ich will versuchen, hier eine Begebenheit wiederzugeben, die in Berlin widerhallte und die Kühnheit und völlig kühle Nerven der Gräfin hervorhob. Der Vorfall wurde mir von einem meiner besten Gestapo-Berichterstatter erzählt, und die Wahrheit wurde später durch einige Juden, die bei der Gräfin untergebracht waren, bestätigt, während sie selbst das Ganze herunterspielte und es für nichts Erwähnenswertes hielt.

Eines Morgens kamen völlig unerwartet 2 Gestapomänner in die Wohnung der Gräfin, während sie selbst außer Haus war. Arglos öffnete einer der beiden Männer, die sich zu diesem Zeitpunkt in der Wohnung aufhielten, die Tür, woraufhin die Gestapo-Männer sie ausfragten. Da sie sich nicht ausweisen konnten, mussten sie mitkommen und die Fahrt ging zum Alexanderplatz, wo sie bis zum Verhör eingesperrt wurden. Hinter der Schiebewand hatten die anderen Bewohner die Diskussion mitgehört und waren schnell zu dem Schluss gekommen, dass die Gestapo-Leute für weitere Ermittlungen zurückkehren würden, sodass klar war, dass die Gestapo die Gräfin nun endgültig festnageln würde und ihre Tage gezählt waren. Kurz darauf kehrte sie in die Wohnung zurück und wurde darüber informiert, was passiert war. Es dauerte nicht lange, bis die beiden Gestapo-Männer zurückkamen, und da sie die Haustür offengelassen hatten, brauchte man nur noch einzutreten. Nach gründlicher Untersuchung fanden sie die Schiebetür, schoben sie beiseite und landeten direkt in den Armen von 6 kräftigen Typen, die sie schnell entwaffneten. Die Gräfin führte daraufhin unter Druck ein regelrechtes Verhör durch, bei dem die Gestapo-Männer aussagten, dass sie einzig und allein mit der Jagd auf Juden beauftragt waren und dass sie beide seit langem die Wohnung im Auge behalten hatten und mehrere verdächtige Gestalten kommen und gehen gesehen hätten. Aus ihrer Geschichte ging auch hervor, dass in ihrem Büro keine Notizen über den Zugriff aufbewahrt wurden und dass an diesem Tag keine Vorgesetzten über ihre Handlungen und ihr Verhalten informiert worden waren.

Nach einer kurzen Diskussion mit ihren Mitarbeitern beschloss die Gräfin, die beiden Gestapo-Männer zu liquidieren, was auch geschah. Sie wurden beide entkleidet und die Leichen versteckt, um später am Abend von der Wohnung an einen abgelegenen Ort außerhalb Berlins transportiert zu werden. Zwei der Juden, die den Gestapo-Männern einigermaßen ähnlich sahen, zogen sich deren Kleider an, änderten etwas in deren Papieren und dann war es Zeit für die wirklich große Aktion, nämlich die inhaftierten Juden vom Alexanderplatz zu holen. Das Ganze funktionierte einwandfrei und es gab keine Hindernisse, die Häftlinge herauszuholen, die nach Angaben der „Gestapo-Männer" in die Gestapo-Zentrale in der Prinz-Albrecht-Straße gebracht werden sollten. Nach dem nächtlichen Abtransport der Leichen begann sich das Leben in der Wohnung der Gräfin wieder zu normalisieren, von der Gestapo war vorerst nichts zu hören.

Was uns überraschte, war, dass die Gräfin den Anschein einer Tierärztin wahren konnte, obwohl sie in Wirklichkeit nur sehr wenig Zeit in ihrem Beruf verbrachte. Mein letztes Treffen mit der Gräfin fand irgendwann Ende März 1945 statt und sie äußerte dann Befürchtungen, dass sie eine sehr schwierige Zeit haben würde. Ich glaube nicht, dass sie mit dem Überleben rechnete, irgendwie gab es eine Tragödie um ihre Person. Ich denke, dass der Mann, der ihr am nächsten stand, ein Jude war und von den Behörden in irgendein Konzentrationslager geschickt wurde, wo er vergast wurde; ihre Mitbewohner deuteten etwas in dieser Richtung an.

Als ich Anfang Mai, als die Russen Berlin besetzt hatten, nach ihr suchte, hatte ich schlimme Befürchtungen. In dem Haus, wo sie ihre Wohnung hatte, wusste man nichts, sie war verschwunden und während der Tage, die wir noch in Berlin verbrachten, erfuhren wir nichts.

Anfang der fünfziger Jahre stieß ich zufällig auf eine Wochenzeitschrift, in der über eine unternehmungslustige Deutsche namens Maltzan berichtet wurde, die Pferde züchtete. Ich schrieb ein paar Zeilen und fragte, ob sie etwas über das weitere Schicksal der Gräfin wüsste, erhielt jedoch eine negative Antwort. Wer schuld an ihrem Tod ist, nun ja, es könnten genauso gut die Russen sein wie die Gestapo, sie wusste zu viel und keine Macht der Welt hätte sie zu irgendwelchen Zugeständnissen zwingen können. Eine tapfere Frau, die es verdient hat, in unserer Erinnerung zu bleiben, die „rote Nelke" unserer Zeit.

Flucht des Ehepaars Weissenberg von Berlin nach Schweden

Unter den vielen jüdischen Familien, mit denen wir es zu tun hatten, kamen uns Margot und Martin Weissenberg in der schwedischen Kirche sehr nahe. Solange sie Gelegenheit hatten, ihre Wohnungsprobleme zu bewältigen, kamen sie sporadisch zu Besuch und hinterließen Briefe zur Weiterleitung an ihre Töchter in England. Martin war Inhaber eines größeren Sportgeschäfts in der Nähe des Alexanderplatzes gewesen und

hatte ein beträchtliches Vermögen besessen. Ende der 30er Jahre musste er sein Geschäft aufgeben und machte sich große Sorgen, wie es mit den Töchtern weitergehen würde. Durch gute Verbindungen gelang es ihm, sie 1938 nach London zu schicken, aber für Margot und sich selbst konnte er keine Ausreise arrangieren und konnte nur die weitere Entwicklung abwarten. Als der Krieg begann, war Martin etwa 60 Jahre alt und Margot 15 Jahre jünger.

1943, irgendwann im Herbst, wurde die Situation für die Juden in Deutschland katastrophal, als alle Volljuden in Konzentrationslager gebracht wurden und die Behörden begannen, Maßnahmen zu ergreifen, damit auch die Halbjuden in Arbeitslager geschickt würden. Menschen mit dem Davidstern auf der Brust waren in Berlin nicht mehr zu sehen und die Lage Weissenbergs begann sehr prekär zu werden. Der Pförtner der schwedischen Kirche, Clawes, ein deutscher Staatsbürger und mit einer Schwedin verheiratet, wurde zum Militärdienst eingezogen und seine Frau reiste nach Schweden, weshalb ihre Dienstwohnung frei wurde. Obwohl es mit großen Risiken verbunden war, ließ Erik Perwe die Weissenbergs in Clawes Wohnung einziehen, was wir später nie zu bereuen hatten, da sie beide sehr hilfsbereit waren und uns zunächst nicht den geringsten Ärger bereiteten. Margot war auch sehr häuslich und hat uns viel in der Küche geholfen. Durch unsere Kontakte mit der Gestapo wussten wir, dass man uns im Auge behielt. Mehrfach sahen wir eindeutige Beweise für unsere Annahme, nicht zuletzt durch die weiblichen Agenten, die die Gestapo zu uns schickte. Über Perwe hatten Weissenbergs auch Briefkontakt zu den Kindern in England. Während einer Zeit im Sommer 1944 verließen sie uns, um zu versuchen, auf eigene Faust aus Berlin herauszukommen, aber die Voraussetzungen dafür waren von Anfang an so gering, dass wir erwarteten, sie bald wieder zu haben. Einige andere jüdische Familien hatten den gleichen Versuch unternommen und von ihnen hörten wir nie wieder etwas. Denunziationen in Deutschland häuften sich, man konnte mit einem guten Kopfgeld für Informationen an die Gestapo rechnen und daher herrschten Angst und Misstrauen der Menschen untereinander. Ich weiß aus eigener Erfahrung im Umgang mit deutschen Familien, was diese Angst und Furcht bedeutete, gute Nachbarn und Freunde hörten auf, miteinander zu verkehren, sie wagten es nicht, sich Leuten anzuvertrauen, das kleinste falsche Wort an einen Außenstehenden und die Lawine konnte losgehen. Trotz des großen Altersunterschieds und Martins zunehmender Nervosität war die Harmonie zwischen den Eheleuten die allerbeste, und Margot wurde so etwas wie ein kleiner Freudenbringer in der Finsterkeit, in der wir lebten.

Perwes Tod im November 1944 war für beide ein harter Schlag und Martin begann, an ihrem Überleben zu zweifeln, teils hatte er Herzprobleme und da uns die Gestapo einige Male unter direkter Aufsicht gehabt hatte, wurde die Situation immer unhaltbarer. Erik Myrgren, der Nachfolger von Perwe, hatte sehr gesunde und positive Ansichten und empfahl, dass wir versuchen sollten, Weissenbergs so schnell wie möglich nach Schweden zu bringen. Der Weg über Lübeck schien uns die beste Lösung

zu sein, aber Martin wollte dieses Risiko nicht eingehen, zu viele Kontrollen und die Ungewissheit, wie es in Lübeck ablaufen würde, ließen ihn sich nicht trauen, zumal sie überhaupt keine Ausweispapiere hatten. Da sie beide ein deutlich jüdisches Aussehen hatten, würde eine eventuelle Kontrolle unterwegs ihre Weiterreise stoppen. Und was dann als nächstes passieren würde, verstehen wohl die meisten Menschen: Sachsenhausen oder Belsen, ein Albtraum, an den ich lieber nicht denke. Wir näherten uns dem Frühjahr 1945 und die Evakuierung von Berlin nach Lübeck war in vollem Gange, aber die Weissenbergs lebten immer noch bei uns, und wie sollten wir einen Weg finden, sie zu retten? Um aus Deutschland ausreisen zu können, musste jede Person ein von der Gestapo beglaubigtes Ausreisevisum haben, was bedeutete, dass die Kontrolle zu 100 % bestand, das heißt, die einzige Möglichkeit bestand darin, die Grenze illegal zu überwinden, was im Fall Weißenbergs völlig ausgeschlossen war. Der Mann, der jedoch einen Ausweg fand, war Erik Myrgren.

Alle, die die Möglichkeit hatten, Deutschland zu verlassen, schwedische Flüchtlinge aus den Nachbarstaaten, die noch in Berlin Verbliebenen und andere Personen, reisten nun in einem stetigen Strom hinüber, und das bedeutete, dass wir viele Pässe für Visaanträge erhielten. Gelegentlich kam es vor, dass jemand seinen Pass verlor, bei den Bombenangriffen verloren viele alles und konnten dankbar sein, dass sie mit dem Leben davonkamen, weshalb die schwedische Gesandtschaft vorläufige gültige Pässe für die Einreise nach Schweden denjenigen ausstellte, die ihre Ausweisdokumente verloren hatten. Myrgren besorgte nun 2 vorläufige Blankopässe, schrieb beide Pässe auf die Namen Martin und Margot Berg, klebte Weissenbergs Lichtbilder auf sie und ließ sie bei der Gesandtschaft ordnungsgemäß abstempeln. Als Flüchtlinge aus Polen hatten sie alles verloren und sollten nach Schweden zurückkehren. Ihr Heimatort in Polen war seit einigen Monaten von russischen Truppen besetzt, weshalb die Gestapo keine Ermittlungen durchführen konnte. Also gab Myrgren die beiden vorläufigen Pässe zusammen mit etwa 10 anderen Pässen ab und bekam sie nach ein paar Tagen von der Gestapo mit einem Ausreisevisum zurück. Wir hatten also die Hälfte des Weges zurückgelegt, aber wie konnten wir das Ehepaar wegbekommen? Auch ihr jüdisches Aussehen und Martins zunehmende Nervosität mussten wir berücksichtigen, sie konnten nicht in einen Zug nach Norden gesetzt werden, also war der einzige Ausweg der Flug. Wir bestellten Tickets und dann kam der Morgen, an dem über das Schicksal Weissenbergs entschieden werden sollte - würde es uns gelingen, sie durch den Gestapo-Kontrollpunkt in Tempelhof zu lotsen? Wir hatten die Visumfrage geklärt, aber es blieb noch viel übrig und das Wichtigste war, zu versuchen, Martin zu beruhigen, ihm Mut zu machen und ihm klarzumachen, dass das Schlimmste hinter uns lag und der Flug nur eine Kleinigkeit war. Ich war selbst nicht gerade ruhig, denn es stand viel auf dem Spiel und ohne Risiko war es beileibe nicht. Nach einer Woche Vorbereitung stand der Abflug bevor und ich fuhr die Weissenbergs früh an einem regenschweren Morgen zum Flughafen Tempelhof, folgte ihnen in die

große Flughalle, gab ihr Gepäck auf und überreichte einem Beamten ihre Pässe. Sowohl Martin als auch Margot zeigten jetzt eine erstaunliche Gelassenheit und als wir an dem Gestapo-Mann ankamen, fröstelte ich ein wenig. Seine Augen ruhten recht lange auf den beiden und ich spürte, wie bei mir der kalte Schweiß ausbrach. Ohne eine Miene zu verziehen, entließ er sie beide mit einer ruhigen Handbewegung und sie konnten zum Flugzeug hinausgehen und ihre Plätze einnehmen. Dann dauerte es 20 Minuten, bis das Flugzeug abhob, sicherlich einige der längsten Minuten, die ich je erlebt habe. Das Flugzeug verschwand außer Sichtweite und zwei Menschen waren vor der Vernichtung gerettet worden.

In Stockholm kümmerte sich die Jüdische Gemeinde um die Weissenbergs, besorgte ihnen eine Wohnung und verschaffte ihnen leichtere Arbeit. Später nach Kriegsende, nach 7 Jahren des Wartens, konnten Margot und Martin ihre Töchter in Stockholm wiedersehen, vielleicht der größte Tag ihres Lebens. Ich selbst hatte das Vergnügen, sie im Herbst 1945 zu besuchen.

Im Mai 1947 schaffte es Martin nicht mehr und wir verabschiedeten uns leise von ihm auf dem Jüdischen Friedhof. Er hatte die Schrecken im Hitlerdeutschland erlebt, aber auch die Befreiung seiner Glaubensbrüder, der wenigen, die überlebt hatten. Margot und ihre Töchter wanderten dann nach Kanada aus und ich hörte zuletzt, dass alles gut wäre. Die Erinnerung verblasst nie, Martin und Margot leben mit uns, die sie kannten, weiter.

Das Attentat auf Hitler am 20. Juli 1944

Vom Attentat auf Hitler am 20. Juli 1944 bekam man in den westlichen Stadtteilen Berlins nahezu nichts mit. Ich selbst fuhr abends von Wilmersdorf über den Fehrbelliner Platz in Richtung Charlottenburg, es war 18 Uhr. Am Fehrbelliner Platz wurde mein Auto zur Kontrolle angehalten und es stellte sich heraus, dass alle Zufahrtsstraßen blockiert waren und Soldaten mit Maschinengewehren sich in dort befindliche Pflanzungen eingegraben hatten. Es wurden keine Informationen oder Erklärungen zum Stopp gegeben und ich musste nach Wilmersdorf zurückkehren. Als ich nach Hause kam, suchte ich den Polizeichef unseres Gebiets auf, und er war der Erste, der mich über das Attentat informierte. Wir erfuhren nicht, was tatsächlich passiert war und mussten uns auf die spärlichen Berichte in den Zeitungen beschränken.

Allmählich kamen laufend Nachrichten von Massenverhaftungen. Der deutsche Hochadel war involviert und die Gestapo ließ ihre Männer sich in größeren Veranstaltungen einschleichen, um auf diese Weise an verdächtige Personen heranzukommen. Bei einem Tee-Empfang für den ehemaligen deutschen Minister in Tokio war eine „Nachtigall“ anwesend, was wenige Tage später zur Verhaftung der ganzen Gesellschaft führte. Der Verdacht ging so weit, dass sogar ältere Damen im Alter von 70–80 Jahren zur Untersuchung herangezogen wurden. Die Behandlung war nicht sehr

human und diesen älteren Damen wurde versprochen, sofort nach Hause gehen zu dürfen, wenn sie die Gerüchtemacher beim Namen nennen würden. Es gab nie Prozesse gegen diese Leute und nur sehr wenige konnten entkommen.

Pfarrer Perwe lag zu diesem Zeitpunkt krank in Dresden, wurde wegen einer Nierenerkrankung im Gerhard-Wagner-Krankenhaus behandelt und in den nächsten Wochen nicht zurückerwartet.[72] In der Regel hielt dann ein Seemannspfarrer oder Gastpfarrer den Gottesdienst ab. An diesem kommenden Sonntag sollte ein deutscher Pfarrer, Pfarrer Detert,[73] predigen. Er sprach fließend Schwedisch, hatte im Laufe der Jahre viele Male geholfen und genoss unser volles Vertrauen.

Am Sonntagmorgen habe ich in den Kirchensaal aufgeräumt und dann kam ein kleiner korpulenter Mann mittleren Alters herein, der bescheiden nach Pfarrer Perwe fragte. Als ich ihn über dessen Krankheit informierte, wurde er sehr traurig, sah sich um und es schien, als hätte er *sålt smöret och tappat pengarna*.[74] Ich bot mich an, behilflich zu sein, worauf er sich bedankte und erklärte, dass es sich um eine persönliche Angelegenheit handelte. Da ich vermutete, dass es um eine religiöse Angelegenheit ging und dass es ein Pfarrer sein musste, der ihm helfen konnte, sagte ich ihm, dass Pfarrer Detert diensthabend sei und dass er sich vertrauensvoll an ihn wenden könne. Nachdem wir einige Minuten über Detert gesprochen hatten, sollte der Mann im Kirchensaal warten, bis Detert ihn aufsuchte. Nach einer Weile kam dieser und ich erzählte, was passiert war, worauf er in den Kirchensaal hochging. Es dauerte etwas, dann kam Detert zurück und fragte, ob ich ihn nach dem Gottesdienst zusammen mit dem unbekannten Mann einschließen könne, was natürlich auf keinen Widerspruch stieß.

Als der Gottesdienst zu Ende war, kamen beide Männer zu mir herunter und ich schloss sie in Perwes Expedition ein und versprach, sie nach einer Stunde herauszulassen. Als der Unbekannte dann gegangen war und ich mit Detert sprach, erwähnte dieser nichts von dem Besuch und ich sah auch keinen Grund, ihn danach zu fragen.

Dann kam Perwe 4–5 Tage später zurück und am Nachmittag bat der mich, in sein Dienstzimmer zu kommen und fragte mich, ob ich mich an einen Besuch eines unbekannten Mannes am vergangenen Sonntag erinnern könne, der ihn sehen wollte. Ich erwähnte kurz, was passiert war, und Perwe erwiderte: „Weißt du, wer dieser Mann war?“ Ich hatte keine Ahnung davon, geschweige denn konnte ich es erraten. Dann kam es langsam von Perwe: „Es war Oberbürgermeister Goerdeler aus Leipzig!“[75]

72 Erik Perwe was recovering from his kidney disease at Alt Döbern at this time; Perwe J. 2018, 241–242, where the story of Goerdeler's visit is recounted.

73 Pastor Ernst Detert from Rathenow, a member of the Confessing Church.

74 Swedish saying: "Sold the butter and lost the money."

75 Carl Friedrich Goerdeler (1884–1945) – a lawyer and mayor of Leipzig from 1930 to 1937. Because of his anti-Hitler views, he was forced to resign from office and subsequently became involved in the anti-Nazi resistance. He was associated with the group that planned the assassination attempt on Hitler. Had the attempt succeeded, he was intended to become Chancellor of Germany. Following the failed assassination attempt of 20 July 1944, a wanted notice was issued for him.

Perwe sagte weiter, dass Goerdeler seit der Verhaftung von Graf Stauffenberg und Generaloberst Beck am 20. Juli untergetaucht sei. Später hatte er die schwedische Botschaft kontaktiert und beantragt, nach Schweden reisen zu dürfen, einen Flüchtlingspass zu erhalten, und einen Asylantrag gestellt. Dies sei ihm verständlicherweise nicht gewährt worden und deshalb habe er versucht, Kontakt zu Perwe aufzunehmen.

Perwe stellte nun die Frage: „Hättest du ihn ohne unsere Hilfe gehen lassen, wenn du gewusst hättest, wer er war?" Ich erinnere mich, dass ich geantwortet habe: Andere Menschen haben bei uns Hilfe und Schutz gesucht, warum sollte Goerdeler eine Ausnahme sein? „Ich wusste, dass ich diese Antwort bekommen würde!"

Das Einzige, was wir jetzt über den Mann wussten, war, dass er sich immer noch in Berlin aufhalten würde und eine Adresse hinterlassen hatte, an der wir, d. h. Perwe, ihn erreichen konnten. Leider stellte es sich heraus, dass Goerdeler es nicht gewagt hatte, in Berlin zu bleiben, sondern in nördliche Richtung gereist war. Eine Million Reichsmark wurde demjenigen als Belohnung versprochen, der solche Informationen liefern konnte, die zu seiner Verhaftung führten. Ein junges Mädchen der Hitlerjugend erkannte ihn in einem Restaurant in einer norddeutschen Kleinstadt und erntete die Belohnung, dürfte aber nicht viel Freude daran gehabt haben. Goerdeler befand sich noch im Frühjahr 1945 in Gestapo-Haft, bevor er liquidiert wurde.

Ich habe mich oft gefragt, wie es für uns gelaufen wäre, wenn wir Goerdeler in Berlin versteckt hätten. Natürlich hätten wir große Möglichkeiten und viele Freunde, die uns geholfen haben, aber hätte er selbst die Strapazen ertragen?

Eine Gestapoagentin

Kurze Zeit nach dem Tod von Erik Perwe, meiner Erinnerung nach Anfang 1945, stellten wir eines Morgens fest, dass die Autoreifen von Perwes DKW gestohlen worden waren und dass das Auto auf Ziegelsteinen aufgestellt war. Der Fall wurde der Polizei gemeldet und ein junger Kriminalbeamter erschien zur Untersuchung. Gleich zu Beginn machte er deutlich, dass die Möglichkeiten, die Reifen zurückzubekommen, nahezu ausgeschlossen waren.

Der Kriminalbeamte, der hier Müller genannt wird, da ich seinen richtigen Namen nicht erwähnen will, um eventuelle Nachteile für ihn zu vermeiden, und ich wurden gute Freunde und wir begannen, uns zu treffen. Recht häufig kam er unangemeldet und wenn ich beschäftigt war, nickte er und ging weiter. Eines Nachmittags hatte ich 5–6 Besucher im Büro, als er erschien und sich in die Schlange setzte. Nach etwa einer Stunde trat er vor und sagte, neben ihm sitze ein etwas über 20-jähriges Mädchen, das ihm erzählte, sie sei ein Flüchtling und wolle nach Schweden gehen. Sie war

He was identified and arrested in Marienwerder (now Kwidzyń in Poland) on 12 August. Sentenced to death by the Volksgerichtshof, he was executed in Berlin on 2 February 1945.

zu uns gegangen, um Hilfe mit einem Reisepass zu bekommen. Müller wusste, dass wir mit solcher Tätigkeit nichts zu tun hatten und erwähnte nebenbei, dass er dem Mädchen den Weg zur schwedischen Gesandtschaft zeigen wollte. Er versprach, sich wieder zu melden.

So vergingen einige Tage und Müller rief an und fragte, ob er das Mädchen mitnehmen und abends hochkommen könne. Dem stand nichts im Wege. Das Mädchen war eher ärmlich gekleidet und erzählte von ihren Erlebnissen in Polen und dass sie jetzt nirgendwo hingehen könne. Bei der Gesandtschaft hatte man ihr nicht helfen können, sondern sie nach ihrer eigenen Aussage an uns verwiesen. Dass sie bei der Gesandtschaft gewesen war, wurde von Müller bestätigt. Wir haben alles Mögliche besprochen, auch die Verhältnisse in Berlin. Leider konnte ich ihr außer etwas Geld und Lebensmittelmarken nichts geben. Noch knapp eine Woche später waren die beiden eines Abends bei mir und es schien, als hätte Müller das Mädchen etwas liebgewonnen. Sie machte auf mich einen guten Eindruck und ich hatte keinen Grund, an ihren Informationen zu zweifeln.

Eines Morgens rief mich Müller an, hörte sich am Telefon seltsam an und sagte seinen Namen nicht. Er bat darum, dass ich ihn in einer dringenden Angelegenheit sofort empfange, und ich bat ihn, zu mir zu kommen. Es wurde mir klar, dass etwas Ernstes passiert sein musste und es war nicht zu vermeiden, dass ich etwas nervös wurde.

Müller erschien, unrasiert und blass, furchtbar nervös, also musste ich ihm einen starken Brandy einschenken, um ihn zu beruhigen und zum Reden zu bringen.

Zunächst erzählte er davon, dass er das Mädchen gleich am ersten Tag mit nach Hause gebracht und ein Verhältnis mit ihr begonnen habe. Alles war in Ordnung, das Mädchen hatte geputzt, gewaschen und gekocht. Sie hatte auch keine so großen Ansprüche gehabt. Heute Morgen war sie auf Arbeitssuche gegangen und die beiden hatten sich für 17 Uhr vor den Toren der Landhausstraße 25–27[76] verabredet. Müller hatte nichts Ungewöhnliches festgestellt. Dann hatte das Telefon geklingelt und einer seiner ältesten und besten Kameraden, ein Mitarbeiter der Gestapo-Organisation in Spandau, hatte gesagt, dass er am Nachmittag um 17 Uhr vor unserer Tür verhaftet werden würde und dass das Mädchen, mit dem er zusammenlebte, seit langer Zeit Gestapo-Agent sei.

Es war wirklich ein Schock. Ich selbst begann, darüber nachzudenken, wie sehr ich in die Sache verwickelt war, aber nach einer Weile war ich überzeugt, dass ich mich in ihrer Gegenwart nicht so geäußert hatte, dass es zu Maßnahmen gegen mich persönlich führen könnte. Auf jeden Fall war es eine sehr ernste Angelegenheit und es war schlimm genug, dass die Gestapo uns im Auge hatte. Ich kontaktierte meine Beziehungen bei der Gestapo, die beiden Männer, die ich regelmäßig mit Alkohol, Tabak und Kaffee schmierte, und bekam die Angaben Müllers bestätigt. Gegen uns

76 Address of the Swedish Victoria Congregation in Berlin-Wilmersdorf.

selbst gab es nichts Besonderes, außer dass wir überwacht wurden, aber das passierte allen Neutralen.

Doch wie sollte Müller vor Spandau gerettet werden? Einige Stunden lang besprachen wir die Angelegenheit gründlich, um einen Ausweg zu finden. Dass Müller Berlin verlassen und auf der Flucht bleiben sollte, hielten wir für sinnlos, es gab keine Möglichkeit, den Kontrollen zu entgehen, und mit einer Fahndungsliste der Gestapo im Rücken wäre Müller möglicherweise nicht in der Lage, eine Woche wegzubleiben, geschweige denn ein halbes Jahr, also so lange, wie unseren Berechnungen nach der Krieg noch dauern würde, Nun ja, schließlich hatten wir einen Plan, aber um ihn in die Tat umzusetzen, war die Mitarbeit der Polizeistation auf der anderen Straßenseite erforderlich. Also ging ich zum Pförtner und bat ihn, den Kommissar und seinen engsten Mann darüber zu informieren, sie seien herzlich willkommen, mit mir Kaffee zu trinken. Es dauerte nicht lange, bis die beiden alten Männer in unserem kleinen Bunker im Keller saßen, wo sie fast jeden Abend Nachrichten aus England im Radio hörten. Keiner von ihnen war Nazi oder ein Sympathisant des Dritten Reiches. Nach dem Kaffeetrinken erzählte ich ihnen von Müllers Dilemma und dem, was um 17 Uhr passieren würde, und berichtete, was wir vereinbart hatten, nämlich unter der Bedingung, dass unsere Freunde von der Bezirkspolizei sich bereit erklärten, uns zu helfen.

Unser Plan sah wie folgt aus: Wenn sich das Mädchen dem Tor näherte, wir wussten durch Müllers Gestapofreund, dass das Mädchen selbst um 17 Uhr am Tor sein würde, würde Müller dort stehen und auf der anderen Straßenseite am Tor des Polizeireviers, stände Hoffmann, der engste Mann des Kommissars. Er würde bereit sein, hinüberzukommen, wenn Müller einen Autotransport für eine Festnahme anforderte und das Mädchen im Auto des Reviers zum Quartier der Gestapo am Alexanderplatz bringen.

Keiner unserer Freunde bei der Polizei hatte etwas dagegen einzuwenden, vielmehr schienen sie sich darüber zu freuen, der Gestapo einen Leckerbissen übergeben zu können. Ihrer Meinung nach bestand kein Risiko für sie selbst, geschweige denn für mich. Es würde alles davon abhängen, wie Müller sich verhielt und ob die Gestapo ihm glaubte.

Es ging auf 17 Uhr zu, der Kommissar stand an seinem Fenster im Dienstzimmer und selbst befand ich mich in der Küche, so dass wir beide die bevorstehenden Ereignisse im Blick hatten. Pünktlich kam das Mädchen zum Tor, und etwa 20 Meter dahinter fuhr langsam ein gedecktes Auto heran . Von meinem Standpunkt aus konnte ich deutlich uniformierte Männer im Auto sehen. Von der anderen Seite kommt nun Müller, geht zu Hoffmann und sagt ein paar Worte zu ihm, worauf die beiden Herren zu dem Mädchen gehen. Der Gestapo-Wagen hatte inzwischen in angemessenem Abstand angehalten.

Mit lauter Stimme erklärte Müller, dass das festgenommene Mädchen im Verdacht stehe, Agentin einer ausländischen Macht zu sein und defätistische Äußerungen über das Regime und den Führer gemacht habe. Er forderte anschließend Hoffmann auf,

Auto und Chauffeur zur Verfügung zu stellen, worauf die beiden zusammen mit dem Mädchen zum Quartier der Gestapo am Alexanderplatz fuhren. Der Sinn der Fahrt dorthin war, dass die Revierpolizei mit ihnen zu tun hatte, nach Spandau zu fahren wäre für Müller lebensgefährlich gewesen.

Dann wartete ich gespannt, was passieren würde. Anschließend fuhr der Gestapo-Wagen langsam am Tor vorbei und kehrte vermutlich nach Spandau zurück. Nach etwas mehr als einer Stunde kehrten Müller und Hoffmann zurück, am Alexanderplatz hatte Müller das Mädchen mit einem Bericht zurückgelassen.

Anschließend wurde Müller ein paar Mal zur Befragung zu seinem Bericht vorgeladen und musste ausführlich über seine Maßnahmen während der Zeit, die er mit dem Mädchen verbrachte, berichten. Weder Müller noch ich wagten es, bei unseren Beziehungen nach dem weiteren Schicksal des Mädchens zu fragen, es ist aber wahrscheinlich, dass sie wegen ihrer Art, die Angelegenheit Müller zu handhaben, einen ordentlichen Nasenstüber erhielt. Pech für sie, dass sie im Wartezimmer der Gemeinde gerade Müller traf, vielleicht wäre es für sie besser gegangen, wenn jemand anders sich um sie gekümmert hätte.

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